BACK FROM THE DEAD

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DOCTOR WHO: BACK FROM THE DEAD

First published in serial form between 16. May 1999 and 12. January 2000

This edition published 2007

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Original series broadcast on the BBC

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For the denizens of alt.drwho.creative

TAROT

Geneva: January 11. 1969

Saturday, 09:29

Softly, it began to snow.

The Doctor watched the base slowly disappear beneath the cold, thinking. He tapped his umbrella absentmindedly, a pattern it would take a squadron of genii a fortnight's solid work to predict: behind him and the squat concrete buildings, a Cyber-army was massing. Five minutes ago, Ace had got herself captured and was probably already being interrogated by the Cyber-leader. Most of the UNIT troops were dead, or being converted into fresh Cybermen. But despite all of that, something didn't feel right about the base.

He checked his pocket watch: he still had twenty minutes before he would save the world. Plenty of time for a quick look round.

Opening his umbrella, his soft grey eyes scanned the base. Most of the blocky grey buildings were slowly turning white under the snow. It would slow UNIT down a fraction of a second, but not the Cybermen: he adjusted his timing suitably. Most of the base was empty now: the troops in hiding, the rest evacuated. Only the fatalities remained, islands of crimson khaki, some still warm enough to melt the falling snow.

Out of the corner of his eye, the Doctor saw something move. He checked his watch: no, not them, yet.

Sitting with his back against the accounts department was a soldier. He wore the simple khaki uniform of the regulars and a slim brown beret perched at a jaunty angle on his head. At first, the Doctor had taken him for just another of the casualties, until he'd seen him move. He was shuffling an outsized pack of cards with delicate pianist's fingers, then dealing them out on the snow to some unknown pattern of his own design.

Quietly, the Doctor paced over, leaving a trail of frozen footprints marring the unbroken snowfall around him.

'Good game?' he asked.

The soldier looked up calmly. A pair of crystal blue eyes drained the colour from the rest of his face, sparkling fire in the morning sun. The Doctor found himself transfixed by them: the soldier reminded him of somebody, but he couldn't think who.

'You could say that,' the soldier replied, slowly turning the top card over.

The Doctor looked at it: a picture of a pale rider holding out a cup. The

Doctor knew he recognised him. His horse's hooves rested gently on the words *Chevalier des Coupes*. The Cavalier of Cups.

'Tarot?' he asked, an eyebrow raised. The soldier merely nodded.

The Doctor tried to remember just what the cavalier symbolised. Wasn't it an invitation? A challenge? But the card was upside down - no, reversed. Didn't that change the meaning?

'Would you like a reading?' the soldier asked.

Subtlety. Cunning. That was what the card meant.

'I don't know,' the Doctor said. 'It's not safe here.'

The soldier smiled: 'Surely you've got all of that in hand by now?'

So the Doctor sat opposite him on the snow-strewn concrete, because in that instant he'd realised just who it was the soldier reminded him of: himself. The soldier smiled and handed him the cards.

The snow kept falling.

The Doctor handed back the shuffled cards, and the soldier took them with a grave face. He started laying them down on the snow. Face up, they started to form a pattern. The Doctor was sure he recognised it: perhaps if he tipped his head, or squinted maybe, it would come to him.

'Any specific question you want to ask?' the soldier asked.

The Doctor shook his head.

'Too late now anyway.'

The last card went down, and the Doctor tipped his head and squinted. The pattern remained illusive. He rested his elbows on his knees, dropping his umbrella to the floor, and scrutinised the six cards again.

‘All Major Arcana,’ the soldier commented, impressed. ‘You’ve got a powerful future, Doctor.’

The Doctor had to admit defeat.

‘What do they mean?’

The soldier calmly slid the first card out with a slender digit. It was a picture of a couple sitting under a full moon.

‘This is the present,’ he explained. ‘The moon. Nasty card, the moon. Most of yours are nasty cards. She stands for deceit, danger, that sort of thing. Unknown enemies, and unforeseen dangers. Ring any bells?’

‘Perhaps,’ answered the Time Lord.

‘Well, the chariot here, he’s telling you what your immediate obstacles are. He says there’s trouble in store, some great ordeal to overcome. It doesn’t look good, does it?’

The Doctor said nothing, his eyes on the cards.

‘This is a good one: this says you’re looking for justice. You want to be a good person. I mean you can see that from your past here: the Magician and Junon. That’s a good combination: resolution and wisdom. Looks like you used to know what you were doing.’ The soldier paused, his finger tapping gently on the final card. ‘And then there’s this. The major influence on your immediate future.’

The Doctor looked down at the card. The snow was starting to obscure

it, and he wiped it off with a single warm finger. The over-riding influence on his future: a skeleton reaping at barren ground. *La Mort*. Death.

‘It doesn’t necessarily mean death,’ the soldier said quietly. ‘It could just mean change: the death of the old, the birth of the new, that sort of thing.’

The Doctor made as if to move, but the soldier rested a hand on his knee.

‘Not yet. It’s not over.’

The Doctor stayed where he was. He couldn’t leave.

The soldier dealt out four more cards onto the frozen concrete, one above the other in a straight line. The Doctor’s eyes stayed on the death card.

‘I wouldn’t worry about it too much,’ the soldier said, then stopped to examine the other cards. ‘Then again . . .’

The Doctor shifted his gaze. Four new cards: an angel with an urn, upside down,

(Reversed, a small part of his mind told him.)

an ancient tower being struck by lightning, a devil wielding a pitchfork gazing down on destruction, and finally a man hanging upside down from a tree by one leg.

‘Temperance reversed,’ the soldier read, ‘the house of God, the Devil, the Hanged Man.’

‘What . . .’ the Doctor’s voice cracked. ‘What do they mean.’

The soldier looked from him, to the cards. His finger pointed them out one by one.

‘Temperance is you now. Normally she’s a good card to have - harmony, friendship, that sort of thing. Not for you, though. She’s reversed. You’re at conflict with yourself, a discord. That’s not good.’

‘No,’ said the Doctor, but whether he was agreeing or protesting, he wasn’t sure.

‘And the tower, that’s the things you can’t control about your future. Looks like you’re going to have a turbulent time: evil influences, terrible danger, collapse of the old, ruin and misery, that sort of thing. And him here, he’s how you’ll feel about all of this. *Il Diable*: bondage, shock, violence, self-punishment. It doesn’t look like your going to have a good time of it, Doctor.’

The Doctor looked down at the cards spelling his life out in the falling snow. He shook his head and told himself he didn’t believe a word of it.

‘What about that?’ he asked, pointing at the final card.

The soldier picked it up.

‘The Hanging Man. He’s the outcome of all this torment,’ softly he pushed the card into the Doctor’s hand. He took it meekly. ‘He’s not as bad as he looks, really. He stands for sacrifice, improvement, rebirth . . .’

The Doctor looked up from the card and into the soldier’s eyes.

‘He stands for regeneration,’ the soldier said.

The Doctor stood, slipping the oversized card into his coat pocket. The soldier remained seated, gathering up the rest of the pack. The Doctor checked his watch: four minutes left.

‘I’d better be going,’ the Doctor told him.

The soldier didn’t look up.

‘Off to face those unknown enemies?’

‘No,’ he said, shaking his head. ‘I know these of old.’

The snow fell. Neither of them moved. Eventually, the Doctor turned to head back to the Cybermen. The soldier stopped him quietly.

‘Doctor?’ the Doctor stopped, turned. ‘Good luck.’

The Doctor looked down into the soldier’s burning blue eyes, said:

‘Thank you.’

And with those words, he opened his umbrella and walked away around the side of the building. He walked casually and calmly, his piecing grey eyes drinking every detail of the snow covered buildings, his mind ticking off the seconds. If he was going to face his future, he would do it on his own terms. After all, he was the Doctor. Something was wrong here, and it was up to him to put it right.

THE BEAST

PROLOGUE

Perivale: 19. November, 1989

17:35

‘Come on, Ace,’ the Doctor said as they clambered down the hill, ‘we’ve got work to do.’

And she looked up at him then, smiling there next to her with his hat jammed on his head, wiry hair poking out from under the brim, and she realised in the most profound way she had ever felt, she was hungry.

‘Can we get some dinner first?’ she asked.

‘Tea,’ he replied. ‘And crumpets.’

Ace grinned, and the Doctor slipped a fatherly arm across her shoulders. He felt cold.

‘Wicked,’ she agreed. ‘Where?’

The Doctor didn't reply, just took a finger and pointed it down the rolling slope of the hill. Ace followed it with her eyes.

Down below them, Perivale sat bathed in the amber light of dusk. She could see it all from up here - something she'd never noticed when she'd lived here. There was the pub, with a crowd of teenagers steadily gathering outside, and the supermarket beside it, still cheerfully advertising its wares. There were the little houses clustered around the main road, each with a family inside probably settling down for dinner and *Neighbours*. The trees rustled slightly in the early evening breeze, and the windows of the buildings caught the sunlight and cast its rosy glow back up to them.

It looked like a dump.

'There?' she asked, pointing her own finger down to the main road, to the TARDIS. Home.

'There,' the Doctor agreed.

Something rustled in the bushes. As she looked, a small black cat poked its nose cautiously out, ready to bolt if she moved too fast. Ace surprised herself by crouching down slowly and holding out her hand to it. She seemed to have developed a soft spot for the little fur balls. Big surprise.

It walked out, slowly, just in case, and looked up at her with two bright green eyes. Then

Ace saw herself, bathed in alien yellow light. She was looking up at herself, crouching on the floor, arm outstretched, sunlight glinting on the myriad of badges speckled across her chest. She saw the Doctor standing beside her, eyes to the horizon, and

‘It’s one of them,’ she said, shaken. ‘A kitling.’

The Doctor didn’t move - at least, she didn’t hear him move. The vision had passed, and she could no longer smell his emotions, strange and different in her mind. It wasn’t something she wanted to repeat: nor was the situation something she wanted to remember. The feline Cheetah people, piece, loyal, free, and doomed. It made her shiver when she remembered how close she’d become to being one. The kitling nuzzled its ear against her hand, and she didn’t dare move.

‘There’s bound to be a few still around,’ he said softly. ‘Scavenging. They shouldn’t cause too much trouble.’

‘I . . .’ the kitling rolled onto its back, offering up its stomach for inspection. Or the fatal bite. ‘I saw through its eyes.’

‘Ah,’ said the Doctor. ‘I did say you’d always take the planet with you. I shouldn’t worry. You’ll be alright. You didn’t fight.’

Ace found herself stroking the soft fur on the kitling’s belly. She hadn’t intended to, but somehow she was. Instinct. Even as she did it, she was looking up to the Doctor. He seemed like a giant, towering over her, leaning gently on his umbrella. The breeze ruffled his hair, slightly. It smelt of alien sands, and brimstone.

‘No,’ she said. ‘But you did.’

‘Yes,’ agreed the Doctor. For just a moment, Ace was sure his grey eyes flashed bright yellow.

ONE

Pyecombe: 29. July, 1998

11:32

It was a bitter morning, the sky clear and blue. The graveyard was practically empty, save for a solitary robin looking for its breakfast, and row after row of grey, silent stones. And the mourner.

He stood by the freshly dug grave, looking down in silence at the stone, grey eyes on grey granite. He wasn't dressed in the customary black, instead in an almost disrespectful pullover covered by a dark jacket. His dark, wiry hair was covered by a light Panama hat, whilst his hands twisted an umbrella nervously. Somehow, this didn't seem to matter.

'I'm sorry,' he said softly.

The gravestone said nothing, save for its inscription: Brig. Alistair

Gordon Lethbridge-Stewart. Leader of men.

Most of the other mourners were gone now: in truth, not many of them had stayed after the coffin had been respectfully lowered, and the handful of dirt each tossed. There was only the lone mourner, and his young friend waiting outside the church: a young girl in a badge-speckled bomber jacket. She was patiently waiting for her friend to say his goodbyes, looking on with a quiet concern from behind dark tinted glasses, impotent. The mourner didn't move.

It hadn't been much of a service: without Doris to organise things, the military had gone for their standard old soldier's funeral. A smattering of old brass, and some ageing general saying as much about the Brigadier's exploits as D-notice and official secrets would allow. They spoke of the soldier, the husband, the father, and managed to say nothing of the man.

Hardly any of the old team had been there: the military had fallen out of touch with most of them long ago, and there was no-one else to tell them. The mourner supposed it was up to him to do that, now. Only Benton had made it, in the end. He'd sat quiet as a mouse at the back of the church, and politely declined the offer of saying a few words. He probably knew that no-one there really wanted to hear him speak. He nodded politely to the mourner once the ceremony was over - probably not even recognising him - and left soon after.

All in all, the military had done their level best to ignore anything that made the Brigadier who he was, and had instead settled for what was easiest. It shouldn't even have been in a church.

As it was, the funeral was a sham.

‘I didn’t bring any flowers,’ the mourner said softly. ‘I will next time. I know a wonderful little planet that does the most remarkable roses. You were always partial to roses. You and Doris.’

Politely, the mourner doffed his hat to the grave’s neighbour: Doris Lethbridge-Stewart, in loving memory. He could still remember that funeral, less than six months ago, relatively speaking. The church full of old friends, of happy memories, and the Brigadier - solid as a rock - standing where he was now, and saying goodbye. Or au revoir, as it turned out.

The mourner didn’t return his hat to his head, instead using his free hand to turn the brim. His hands looked for all the world like they’d rather be juggling, or playing the spoons.

‘So what else can I tell you?’ he said with false cheerfulness, a cracked smile plastered across his impish face. ‘The reunion went well. I haven’t actually been there myself, yet, but I’ve heard great things about it. I’m having a bit of trouble getting in touch with Mike, but I’ve assured myself that he was there, so I suppose I’ll have to persevere.’

His eyes darkened, perhaps stung by the bitter wind, perhaps not. He dropped his hat back onto his head, grasped his umbrella for support. He felt like he was drowning.

‘I’m sorry,’ he whispered. ‘I’m sorry I wasn’t there.’

He paused, a thought striking him.

‘I wasn’t there, was I?’ he asked. ‘I don’t think I was there. It’s so very hard to keep up with myself, sometimes. I’m sorry I haven’t been there yet. There, that should cover it.’

‘Excuse me, sir?’ came a voice from behind.

The mourner turned, finding himself facing a stranger. He was a fairly tall man, clad in a pristine blue Navy uniform. His hair was cropped so short that is was impossible to make out a colour, but his eyebrows were a brilliant flame red, resting above piercing blue eyes. Did he know anybody in the Navy? He couldn’t recall.

‘Yes?’

Out of the corner of his eye, the mourner could just make out his young friend hurrying over. She was the protective sort. But the stranger seemed harmless enough - probably just an old friend of the Brigadier’s - or, more likely, the son of an old friend. He probably just wants to talk about old times.

‘Are you Dr. John Smith?’

The mourner grasped his umbrella more firmly, drawing himself up to his full height, which didn’t even bring him up to the stranger’s chin. Despite that, he still gave the impression that he was a powerful man, someone to be reckoned with.

‘Please,’ he said firmly, ‘call me Doctor.’

The stranger bowed in stiff acknowledgement, a slightly anachronistic gesture.

‘I’m sorry,’ he apologised. ‘Are you the Doctor?’

The mourner, the Doctor, smiled warmly and doffed his hat. His friend appeared from out of nowhere at his elbow, glaring suspiciously at the sailor. Her long brown hair snaked down her back, darting this way and that as she turned her head, flicking like a cat’s tail.

‘Who’s asking?’ she growled.

The Doctor moved himself in between his friend and the stranger, under the pretence of offering the sailor his hand. The stranger took it and shook it firmly.

‘I’m Captain Jötunson,’ he said, smiling warmly. ‘I’m with the UN.’

‘How do you do?’ the Doctor smiled back. ‘This is my friend Ace.’

‘Are you with UNIT?’ the young woman asked.

‘At the moment, yes.’

‘And you need my help,’ the Doctor said. It wasn’t a question.

Jötunson looked at the Doctor, all warmth suddenly gone from his face. The cold sun glinted in his crystal eyes, off his pristine polished buttons. He nodded solemnly. The Doctor grinned infectiously, swinging his umbrella up over his shoulder, and nearly decapitating Ace in the process.

‘Good,’ he said cheerfully. ‘You can tell me about it on the way.’

And he marched off, away from the grave. Ace gave the Captain a wary glance, and he smiled back at her. Despite herself, the young woman found herself smiling back, too. They both scurried after the retreating Doctor.

Softly, from out of nowhere, it began to rain.

TWO

“*MG 4 JC*”

Inscription on a tree.

Manchester: 28. July, 1998

21:20

As the sky slowly turned to black - through red, orange, gold and deepest blue - Mark watched a column of ants slowly make their way towards the doughnuts. They were grouping together at the border of the blanket, probably trying to decide whether to settle for the easy to reach sugar, or to make the more difficult trek for the jam filling. Before they could make their decision, he picked it up.

‘D’you want this?’ he asked.

Jade didn't move, just growling softly. He took that to mean he could have it, and took a bite. The jam trickled slowly down his fingers, and dripped onto her exposed neck.

'You might want to wipe that off,' she told him, moving her leg over his. It would start to hurt soon, but he wouldn't let it bother him for now.

He scooped the drop of jam up with a single finger, and tried to decide whether to drop it for the ants, or to have it himself. Jade took the decision out of his hands by lifting her head from his chest and softly licking his finger. He didn't complain.

'Raspberry,' she said, not entirely disapproving.

'Hmm,' he agreed. He was too relaxed for anything else.

It had been a good day, sitting out on the waste ground. Picnicking. Talking. The sun had been bright and hot, Jade complaining intermittently that she'd forgotten her sunglasses. Mark had leant her his, and spent the rest of the day squinting. Now it was starting to turn colder, but they didn't notice it. The picnic devoured, they'd degenerated into simply lying on the tufting grass, her draped over him, sharing their body heat.

Degenerated, or progressed, depending on your point of view.

He remembered the first time he'd seen her, across the smoke filled union bar. She'd been by the snack bar, trying to get a plate of chips. He'd been at the bar, trying to get a game of pool. The first thing he'd noticed was how small she looked, crowded by her much taller friends. The next was her long black hair, hanging down and covering most of her face. After that it had been how pale her skin was - briefly followed by idle musings about whether

she was anaemic, or just a Goth. Just as he's been about to turn away, she'd lifted her hair out of her eyes, and he'd seen them. Two brilliant emerald gemstones, glinting fire. He'd fallen in love soon after.

It had taken several months to find out all he could about her - that her name was Jade (named after those shining eyes), that her hair was dyed, that she did physics, that she was out of his league. Or so everybody thought - including Mark himself.

'What d'you want to do now?' she asked softly.

'Let's just stay here for a bit,' he said, not saying the first thing that came to mind. 'It's a nice night.'

'Hmm,' she purred, and nuzzled her head back onto Mark's shoulder. He shifted slightly, taking her weight, and her warmth. Solid.

The waste ground sighed softly, and looked back at them both.

He liked to think of it as his waste ground, just a simple bare patch of earth in the heart of the city, but he was the only person he'd ever seen there. And now Jade. It was probably the trek down that put most people off - pushing through thick undergrowth, trying not to fall down the steep slope to the footpath. At least, he thought it was a footpath. Either that or an old disused railway track. Whatever it was, it was mostly nature's now, crowded on either side by tall green leafed trees and nettles. The path little more than a streak of dust between the green.

He remembered Jade complaining as she'd struggled down, clinging alternately to the trees, the ground, him. He'd had it worst, of course, carrying his rucksack with the food in. Nothing fancy - just a bottle of wine, a

corkscrew, a loaf of bread, some cheese, and the doughnuts of course. She'd settled as they walked down the path, arm in arm. It had the same effect on him - all that nature, the birdsong, and even the occasional squirrel. When he took her to the waste ground, she'd practically died.

It was beautiful, especially now in the dusky light. A thin film of grass tried desperately to cling to the dry earth, joined here and there by patches of wild flowers. Daisies - of course - buttercups, and just by his elbow a tiny group of bluebells chiming gently in the breeze. Behind them the allotments, invisible behind the rise of the slope and the cover of the trees. In front of them, the housing estate that now doubled as an army base, also invisible. You could almost imagine you were out in the countryside.

One of the braver ants made a move up Mark's leg. Jade flicked it away casually, and it rejoined its fellows, massing for the assault.

'D'you know what they used to say about the sun and the moon?' Jade asked him, a hand resting on his chest. She could probably feel his heart beating.

'No,' he said, sounding calm. 'What?'

'They used to say that the sun was a chariot, made out of liquid gold. One of the gods carved it. I can't remember which one.'

'One of the gods?'

'Yeah. There were a lot more to go around, back then. They - that's the Vikings, by the way - they said it was pulled by two of the finest horses in creation, and driven by Sol, the most beautiful of all the gods.'

'What about the moon?' he asked, his hand crawling across his chest.

It found hers, and rested.

‘The moon was a chariot too, made out of ice, I think. It rode in front of Sol as a . . .’

‘Herald?’

‘Yes, herald. Mani rode in that one, but it was Sol that everyone remembered. Are you going to kiss me?’

His heart started beating on his ribs to get out. He tried to ignore it, and found it incredibly easy when Jade turned her bright green gaze on him.

‘I was thinking about it,’ he said.

‘Good,’ she said, and kissed him.

It reminded him of the first times - the first for him, and the first with her. Warm pressure. That was the last thing he actually remembered thinking for a while.

He didn’t even notice when the darkness started to look at them, with two yellow slit eyes.

Manchester: 30. July, 1998

14:20

Ace sat crouched over her bacon butty, tomato ketchup dripping stickily onto her plate, watching the city unfold before her. She’d never been to Manchester before, only knew about it from her youth as Madchester, and more recently as a photograph from the Doctor’s newspapers: the shopping

centre with a cloud of smoke over it, and policemen scrabbling away from the blast. Now there wasn't a sign of any of that. Sat right in the heart of the city, she could see row after row of shops, all crowded with opportunist shoppers. Students, people off work early, mothers with children and shopping bags to balance. It made for interesting viewing.

For once, she was alone. It was an odd experience after spending so much time with a constant companion. As she sat watching young lovers walking arm in arm, the Doctor was probably busy dissecting the dead girl. She hadn't felt much like spectating, so had left him to it. Wolsey was somewhere down in Withington, prowling around the undergrowth, scaring the odd granny. If she concentrated, she could feel the pleasure he got from leaping out at passers-by, hissing at little children.

She remembered how Wolsey had scared her when he'd first found them - two months ago, now? It had been the Doctor's idea to bring him into the TARDIS - he told her that once the kitling found someone with the Cheetah gene, it would follow them until one of them was dead. They were bred that way. If she brought it with her, he'd said, at least she'd have some control over it. And she'd be able to name it.

The naming, she discovered, was one of the most important things with the kitlings, especially ones as young as Wolsey. It let them know what their sibling expected from them - a kitling named Killbynight was liable to do just that. Not that they understood the words, just the emotion the sibling put into it whenever they called. That was why she chose Wolsey - something dignified, but non-threatening. It surprised her how quickly she'd grown used to having

him by her side, and in her head. Almost as quickly as she'd got used to wearing sunglasses no matter what the weather. It saved explanations when she went.

In her head, Ace felt a burst of joy as Wolsey found a rabbit to chase. She hoped he didn't catch it - she was still quite disturbed at how good it felt to have flesh tearing between his teeth. He was little more than a kitten, but he was also a hunter, and nothing she could do would change that. She wasn't sure any more whether she wanted to.

The cafe itself was quiet, just herself, a pair of nodding students being served by the motherly owner and several monochrome film stars gazing down from the walls at her. The bacon butty nuzzling in her hand was warm and moist, the ketchup sweet and tangy: almost perfect. She took a ravenous bite, the red sauce dribbling from her lips. Pulling a disgusted face, Ace swallowed hastily and took a gulp of her tea to wash the taste away.

This was disturbing. It was getting so she couldn't even have a sarnie without tasting the chemicals, the plastic aftertaste, the general non-meaty taste of the processed meat. Her taste buds clamoured for the real thing, so she quieted them with another gulp of tea.

Pushing the plate away, she settled back to watch the world go by.

She was rather shocked to discover that the world was also watching her. He was tall and shaven-headed, his eyes hidden beneath round-framed sunglasses. He was standing outside the bookshop, hands in his pockets, dressed entirely in black. And watching her. She hadn't realised until that moment just how annoying sunglasses were: although she could see the set

line of his eyebrows, the hook of his nose, the thin slit that was his mouth, she couldn't see his eyes and she couldn't tell what he was thinking.

Then she realised that he couldn't see hers, either.

Carefully, calmly, she reached down for her butty, and opened the part of her mind that was linked with Wolsey. Within a second, she could feel the velvet pressure as he rubbed his head up and down her legs. She just hoped he hadn't brought the rabbit back with him to play. Taking a bite of the processed bacon, she felt the kitling's curiosity aroused: it wasn't very often she called him to her. Chewing hard on the butty, trying not to gag at the taste, Ace calmly told Wolsey to follow.

There was a time when a command like that would have needed repetition, maybe even a careful demonstration, but not now. Now kitling and sibling were one. Wolsey took a brief look at the target through Ace's eyes, and then was gone.

Calmly, Ace finished her tea, ordered another cup and a slice of apple pie, and sat back to enjoy the show.

'Show me,' she said.

Manchester: 30. July, 1998

13:50

The Doctor sat quietly in the darkness, and looked unblinking into the light. Somewhere out of the blank void, the soft strains of Herbie Hancock drifted out. The Doctor hardly noticed. All his attention was focussed on the

girl’s body in the light.

She was young - eighteen, nineteen, just past Ace’s age - with lank dark hair spread over her face, masking the features. They weren’t important. Her eyes were a brilliant shade of green, the pupils dilated and dead. The only thing she wore was a thin cotton sheet, and a look of absolute terror. It was hardly surprising - her body was covered with claw marks, and her chest had been ripped open by razor sharp canines. Several of her internal organs were missing. It was up to him to discover why.

He was glad Ace had decided to go. He didn’t want her seeing this kind of savagery. It would only make her worry, and she was doing enough of that as it was. Not for herself, of course. She never worried about herself, just leapt straight in to save him. He had a recurring nightmare, when he found the time to sleep, that one day it would be her laid out bare on a slab somewhere. And it would be up to him to wash her, and watch her, and avenge.

But not today. Today it was this stranger, and that made it easier. He didn’t even know her name, just her number: victim number four. The latest, and the last? He doubted it. When they had discovered the first body, they had thought wild animal. Then the second had been killed and left inside a locked house. No way in, unless you had the key. She was a mother, her children staying over at their grandparents. Her boyfriend had found her. He was still in hospital. No, it was no animal, but no human could scratch out a living heart with such power and ferocity. So UNIT had been called in. After victim number three, even they were no wiser. Then somebody had remembered the Brigadier’s funeral, and checked the guest list. He hadn’t

flown in a helicopter for several lifetimes, until today.

The army had settled in quickly. The first attack - the first murder - had only happened five days ago, and yet already they had a base of operations set up. A nearby housing estate had been commandeered, and with typically grand military thinking all the residents rehoused elsewhere. Now there were a handful of prefabricated huts set up in a ring around the motor pool. Jeeps, vans and civilian hatchbacks all sat uneasy under the gaze of the military, they themselves under the unblinking gaze of the silent, dead houses. All the swings in the local patch of grass had been uprooted to make way for a helipad, at the Captain's request. They sat unwanted in one of the front gardens, where they had been thrown. The owners of the house were trying to grow tomatoes, without much success.

Jötunson had left almost as soon as he had briefed the Doctor about the situation - important matters elsewhere to deal with - but he had left him with a Major Domo to look after his needs. He was just a touch older than Ace himself, brown eyed and bristled haired, barely needing to shave in the mornings. Silent as the grave, as well.

'I assume you'll want to talk to her boyfriend first,' the Domo - Peters - had said, once they were inside. 'He's in the local hospital, broken leg and shock.'

'No,' he'd told him. Peters had simply raised an eyebrow. 'I'll need to see the body - I assume you have it?'

'It's in the Morgue. The others have been released to the families, after an autopsy. We didn't find anything unusual. It's not going anywhere.'

‘No, but I’ll need to see it,’ he’d said firmly. ‘Otherwise, how will I know what questions to ask?’

And so here he was, alone in the dark, trying to find the answer. Or, to tell the truth, trying to think of an alternative answer. There were tribes he had visited, back in the dark abysm of time, that believed the eyes retained an image in them after death. The last thing the dead saw in life. If it was true, he had never yet found someone who knew how to unlock their secrets. But still he tried.

The door opened, casting a brief shadow of light across the body, a different perspective. Then it shut again, and the darkness hurried eagerly forwards.

‘I admire your choice in music,’ said Jötunson, invisible in the darkness.

‘You have quite a collection.’

‘A hobby. That’s all.’

‘An extensive hobby,’ the Doctor said, not taking his grey eyes from the corpse. ‘I haven’t even heard of some of those recordings.’

Silence, nothing more.

‘Do you know what I admire about Jazz musicians?’ the Doctor asked, as if to break the silence. Jötunson didn’t answer. ‘The improvisation.’

Again, Jötunson remained silent. If he was still in the room, the darkness did nothing to show it. It even swallowed up the sound of his cool measured breathing. The Doctor didn’t notice, or if he did he chose to keep it to himself.

‘In most music styles it’s enough to learn the songs, to practise, and to

pray for that spark of inspiration. You still have to do all of that with Jazz, but then there's improvisation. The mark of a true Jazz musician isn't how well he plays the songs, but how he responds to the moment.'

'I can have a theatre prepared for an autopsy, if you want to,' Jötunson offered evenly.

The Doctor paused. For a moment, he saw Ace lying on the slab in front of him. Gently, he pulled the cloth up over her injuries, her face.

'No,' he said firmly. 'There's no need to upset the families any more.'

'They've asked for the body to be returned. There'll be a funeral next week.'

'Have you got a blood sample?'

'Yes. And a microscope waiting for you.'

'Good.'

The Doctor headed over to the doorway. He could hear Jötunson follow, and Peters standing rigidly outside. If he really concentrated, he could almost everything that was happening around the base. Somewhere, a soldier was having a cigarette break, and two more were fighting. Somewhere else, a kettle was being brewed, whilst cups clanged together. The Doctor put his finger on the light switch.

'What was her name?' the Doctor asked quietly.

Silence, nothing more.

'I don't know,' Jötunson said eventually. 'I'll find out.'

'Thank you,' said the Doctor. 'Let's go and visit her companion, shall

we?’

And with a flick of his wrist, the Doctor turned on the darkness.

Manchester: 30. July, 1998

14:23

Ace sat back quietly in her chair and sipped on her tea. It was cold. It didn’t matter. With the eyes in her head, she could see the street, and the bookshop crowding towards her. There was also the ghost image of the cafe behind her, reflected back from her dark glasses. And her own yellow eyes staring back at her.

With the eyes of the kitling, Ace could take a good long look at the man looking at her. There was a time, not so long ago, when this kind of thing was difficult. The power of the visions used to knock her to the floor, leave her vulnerable and useless. Not any more: she’d got better with practise. Stretched her muscles.

Wolsey stopped just in front of the man, staring unashamedly up at him. And unnoticed - the man’s gaze was definitely fixed on Ace, despite his own sunglasses. Through Wolsey, she looked for the tell-tale bump of a gun under his long dark coat. Nothing. Perhaps he wasn’t important, just a passer-by captivated by her mysterious beauty. And perhaps she’d fly to the moon. The shaved head practically stank of military - but if he was UNIT, he would have introduced himself. Had the Doctor arranged for a chaperone for her? Possibly - no professional would be so obvious, though.

Whatever, thought Ace. It’s time to up the ante.

Putting down her cup of tea, and warning Wolsey to stay vigilant, she turned her head slightly. Despite the mask of her sunglasses, it was obvious that she was looking straight at her observer. Never one for subtlety, she raised her hand and gave him a coy little wave. She could practically hear him gulp from where she was sitting.

He turned sharply, and hurried off towards the shopping centre. Ace didn’t move, simply thought: Follow.

Wolsey the Hunter padded softly through the busy streets, his eyes locked on his prey, and his sibling in his head.

He knew what his sibling wanted, and he knew how to get it. That was why he didn’t draw attention to himself by stalking his prey like some siblingless kitten with a winged thing. He simply padded over the hard ground, ignoring the siblingless two-legs that crouched and stretched to reach his fine black fur, seemingly following his nose. His sister would be proud.

His prey hurried down the street, not looking back over his shoulder. Perhaps he was panicked, running blind. Or perhaps he was clever, and knew he was being chased. Wolsey wouldn’t be fooled into losing his prey. Wolsey was clever. No matter how the black prey twisted through the siblingless two-legs, he would not be lost. He could even see as the black prey hurried across a busy track swarming with mindless four-wheels, and didn’t panic when the mindless creatures forced him to pause, waiting for a gap.

A moment of doubt: shooting across the track, dodging the four-wheels, had he lost his prey? He stopped dead, head turning slowly this way and that. He could feel his sister in his head searching with him - with such combined prowess, the prey would not stay lost for long.

A siblingless two-legs crouched down right in front of him, arm outstretched, and gabbled:

‘Hewwolikklepuddytat.’

Wolsey wanted to scratch them - nothing too damaging - but his sister restrained him. Sometimes he wondered if she knew anything about the hunt, and blood.

There she said, and the prey was found. He was flapping along towards the tall cross-building as his long black coat streamed out behind him, split like two dark wings. He was flapping towards a narrow passage-way between the cross-building and a blank faced glass-building. The perfect place for the kill.

Or an ambush, warned his sister. Wolsey purred soft reassurance - he would not be hurt, he was the best. He gave the stupid two-legs a sharp hiss, and tried not to purr as he saw her shocked face scurrying away. He felt his sibling make her strange happy growling noise in her throat, and purred at her instead.

Then he was off, slipping between the stone and the concrete, sniffing the footprints of his prey. They smelt strange. He felt his sister’s excitement tinged with - was it fear at the sight of the cross-building’s coloured glass eyes? Perhaps she feared for Wolsey the Hunter. She did not need to:

Wolsey the Hunter was the best - nothing would escape him.

Which was why it came as quite a surprise to round the corner into the alleyway and find nothing but the alleyway staring back at him. Of his prey, there was not even a scent. Just the sound of flapping wings filling the air.

Damn thought his sister.

THREE

Manchester: 30. July, 1998

14:21

The Doctor stood staring out of the window. Across the road he could see row after row of empty rooms, resting above quiet shop fronts. In little more than a month, those rooms would be filled with students of all ages, the shops below bustling as they tried to buy a cheap meal, or drinks for the night ahead. Now, though, they were dead.

He didn't visit hospitals much. For him, medicine and repair were things to be practised in the field, or left to somebody else. The only times he visited hospitals were to visit people he needed to see, or when some misguided soul tried to put him in one. He'd had bad experiences with hospitals.

It was probably the mixture of dying flowers, rotting fruit, and antiseptic.

‘You should be able to talk to him now,’ said the nurse, straightening up. She was a young thing, even tried to give him a reassuring smile. He returned it wearily.

‘Thank you,’ he said, and left the window.

She smiled again, and backed slowly out of the door. The Doctor caught a glimpse of Jötunson, waiting patiently outside, and then the door was shut again. Leaving him alone with the room.

‘Hello, Mark,’ he said softly.

The boy in the bed looked up at him, into his eyes. He was a tall boy - long hair cast casually over the pillow, thick lips and broken nose. Something in his blue eyes made the Doctor think of shutters on windows. He was covered in cuts and bruises, his left leg in plaster. He was lucky.

‘Leave me alone,’ he said weakly.

The Doctor took off his hat and rested it next to his umbrella on the chair. He didn’t sit, instead picking up one of the flowers from the vase and making it dance in his hands. He didn’t speak for a while, the silence breathing around them, alive.

‘I need to know what happened,’ he said finally.

‘Leave me alone,’ Mark repeated, more firmly.

The Doctor rested the flower back down with its fellows. He looked Mark firmly in the eyes. To his credit, the boy didn’t turn away, just glared right back into the abyss.

‘I’ve just come from your friend,’ the Doctor said flatly, and Mark looked away. ‘She was a very beautiful girl. I’m sure you loved her very much.’

‘Jade. Her name was Jade.’

‘I’m sorry. I’m sure you loved Jade very much. I’m here to stop whoever did this to her, but I need your help. Do you understand?’

Silence, nothing more. Then:

‘What d’you need to know?’

Manchester: 28. July, 1998

21:26

‘Quickly!’ he screamed. Jade didn’t answer, except in a panting half-scream. She ran quicker, through the darkness.

He held on tight to her hand, pulling her along behind him, his heart beating hard in his chest. His lungs burned acid. His eyes struggled to peer through the gloom. By the time he caught sight of something, they had already passed it. He couldn’t hear the creature behind them, but he knew it was there. Oh yes, he knew.

It had come out of nowhere. No, it had come out of the black undergrowth. He was stupid to have kept them both there so long, but he didn’t want to leave. It was so warm. And now . . . It wasn’t even human - just darkest shadows and two flaming yellow eyes. Eyes resting on them. Moonlight glinting off its teeth, sharp. Its howl was the sound of the lowest pit of hell. And it was chasing them. Hunting.

‘I can’t . . . any . . .’ gasped Jade. She was petrified, he could feel it. He

was petrified. He pulled her harder.

‘It’s not far,’ he shouted over his shoulder. He couldn’t even look at her. It was his fault.

‘It’s going to -‘

‘We’re nearly there!’ he shouted, pulling. His feet found the ground without his eyes even looking. Adrenaline pumped, his muscles screamed, and his heart was breaking. ‘You can see the road from here. Once we get there we’ll -‘

‘We’ll what?’ Jade sobbed. ‘It’s going to -‘

‘We’ll find a car. We’ll get the hell out of here. It won’t catch us. Come on!’

‘Mark.’

‘I know,’ he said. ‘Come on.’

That was the best he could do. When they hit the road, when they were in the car, he would tell her he loved her, that he was terrified something would happen to her, that he was so, so sorry. But not now. All he could do was run, and drag her along behind him. They were nearly there. They would be . . .

The bank.

He’d forgotten about the bank. Coming down was bad enough - going up again? With that thing behind them. They were going to die.

‘We’re nearly there,’ he shouted back to her. His voice cracked.

The steep slope loomed up before them. The creature loomed up

behind them. The dry bank, clothed in stinging nettled, thorns, branches that grabbed and tore. There was no choice. They couldn't stop, couldn't fight. A car sped by overhead. There would be another, he knew it. They just had to get up there.

He made a decision.

'You go first,' he shouted.

She didn't stop, didn't argue. She just squeezed his hand and sped on in front of him, her long dark hair trailing back behind her. If anything happened to her . . . She started climbing the slope, grabbing out with her hands and pulling herself up despite the thorns. He didn't stop, just raced up behind her. They went together.

The darkness reached in to swallow them, grasping at them with clawed hands. He felt the thorns tear his face, the bracken grab at his clothes. He saw Jade scrambling up in front of him, got hit in the chest by a branch she pushed carelessly back. The road ahead beckoned. They were going to make it. They were . . .

He lost his footing on the leafy floor, and tumbled backwards.

He tried desperately to grab hold of something, anything. He failed. He felt his stomach lurch, and his head swap places with his feet, and then he was in freefall. Flying. The branches whipped out at him, cracked his ribs and his head, and still he flew. Hours passed, and then he landed.

He didn't even hear the crack, just felt the fire shoot up his leg, and the stars burst in his head.

He lay there - how long - in the dark, crying, hurting, and praying.

‘Mark?’ she called down, terrified. Please god tell me she hasn’t stopped. ‘Mark?’

A choice.

‘Go!’ he screamed. ‘Run!’

She didn’t need telling twice. He saw her scramble up the side of the bank, not even looking back. Her skirt caught on the undergrowth, tore. A trickle of blood ran down her leg. She didn’t pause.

‘Go,’ he said.

It dawned on him that he was going to die.

His heart exploded in his chest, and the pain cleared. He dragged himself to his feet. Fell as his leg buckled under him in a fresh burst of pain. He ignored it, rose again, dragged himself away. He didn’t want to die. He was too young. He was too . . .

He heard the scream, and his head whiplashed up. He was just in time to see Jade pounced on by the night. Up on the road. It had doubled round on them. She screamed again, not even a human sound any more, just pain, and fear, and . . .

He fell, rolled under the bridge, and did nothing. It seemed like hours until the screaming stopped.

Manchester: 30. July, 1998

14:23

The room was antiseptic and white, and silent. The sunlight that filtered in through the window did nothing to warm it. It just picked out Mark lying battered and broken on his bed, and left the Doctor in shadow in his chair. He was leaning silent on his umbrella, staring at Mark with two cold grey eyes. His face was nothing but a pool of shadow.

‘I don’t want to tell you this,’ Mark said, drained.

‘You have to. Anything may be important. Anything.’

‘It’s got nothing to do with it. Nothing.’

Tears started to roll slowly down Mark’s linen white face. The Doctor didn’t move, if he noticed. His cold stare remained on Mark’s eyes.

‘I . . . I listened to it . . . to it . . . It should have been me.’

‘Why?’ asked the Doctor softly.

‘I loved her.’

It should have been answer enough. It wasn’t.

‘And?’

‘I listened to it kill her,’ he snarled. ‘I heard her scream. I loved her, and all I could think was . . . was I was glad it was her. Not me.’

Silence. The flowers in the vase slowly died, the fruit slowly rotted. Outside a car passed by. The Doctor didn’t breathe, just sat leaning on his umbrella.

‘The instinct for survival,’ the Doctor intoned.

‘I loved her. It should have been me.’

The Doctor stood, put his hat on his head. The brim covered his eyes in shadow. Nothing escaped of his emotions.

‘I know,’ he said. ‘It wasn’t your fault.’

With that, the Doctor walked to the door. His face was set. He knew his enemy.

‘Will you kill it?’ Mark asked softly.

The Doctor left the room.

FOUR

Manchester: July 30. 1998

14:32

The park was quite quiet, considering. Wilmslow Road buzzed with traffic behind him, half hidden by the trees, but hardly anyone came through at this time in the afternoon. The students would cut through come three o'clock, and their way home ready for another night in the pub. Bloody students, bloody loaded the lot of them. Posh trainers and the latest fashions, and never too broke for that one last pint before ringing for a taxi on their bloody mobile phones. They said they rot the brain, those mobiles, and having seen half the students outside Hardy's Well, he could well believe it. Bloody loaded sods.

But it didn't matter now. He was on his way to the pub himself, now. Not one packed full of students, mind. The Horse, nice and quiet and local, full

of City fans, Christ only a stone's throw from the ground itself. Bloody students were all United fans, weren't they. Even the foreign ones.

The lake spread out in front of him, geese and ducks flapping about on the surface. Nobody fishing, which was odd. There usually were, despite the fact he didn't know if there were any fish in there or not. Perhaps they were fishing for condoms, or just trying to spend a couple of hours away from the wife and her nagging. Either way it was odd to see them gone. Perhaps the clouds overhead had put them off. Threatening rain, even thunder. Let it bloody threaten, it didn't bother him. He could see the caravan park up ahead, and the pub was only a couple of minutes from there. He'd be safe and dry before the weather broke, and then he could sit it out there.

That was when he saw him.

Stood at the far end of the lake, a dark shape, not too tall, not too bulky. He was standing stock still, head up to the sky as if he was sniffing out the coming storm. Nice looking clothes, probably cost a bit, but they were starting to look a bit tatty and dirt encrusted. Must be a student – no one else with the money to buy clothes that good lets them get into that state. Probably got a couple of quid on him somewhere, enough for another pint or two in the Horse. He looked around for something useful, and found a large branch lying at his feet. God was smiling on him.

Picking up the branch, hefting it like a club, he started to advance on the dark shape on the horizon. Above him, the clouds rolled, bringing in the rain.

Manchester: July 30. 1998

15:01

Damn.

Damn.

Damn.

Ace barely saw as Wolsey rolled playfully onto his back, padding softly at her boot laces, warming his back on the hot pavement. Her head flicked this way and that, searching for some sign of the watcher. Nothing. Damn. She'd spent half an hour going over that little alley by the church – everything but getting down on her knees and sniffing the paving slabs. Nothing. None of the builders working nearby had seen anything, except a blond in a boob tube. He'd vanished into thin air, which was of course impossible. Except her and the Doctor did it nearly every day. Damn!

Wolsey soon gave up on her, this new game was no fun to play, and he was disturbed by dark thoughts that occasionally flashed his way. The game with the dark man had been fun, to start with, but had ended badly, with shame. He had never lost a prey before, and he didn't want to dwell on it. He wanted a new game, one he could win, and preferably one that ended with the taste of blood in his mouth. He padded again at his Sister's feet, but her mind was still on the lost prey, her eyes watching every two-legs that hurried by. No, this was not the game for Wolsey the Hunter.

Ace paid the kitling no heed, instead drawing her knees up to her chin and snarling to herself. She'd tried everything she could think of – doubling back, retracing her steps, then finally aimlessly wandering in the vain hope he

might make his presence felt again. Nothing. If he was still watching her, he was being a lot more careful about it. She hadn't seen anyone in the last ten minutes who was remotely like him. Instead she'd settled on a bench in Albert Square to try and plan her next move, fighting the urge to hiss at some passer-by and run them to ground just for the hell of it.

Her eyes fell on Wolsey, the jet black kitten crawling silently on his belly, stalking the statue at the centre of the square. He seemed to have put their failure firmly behind him, perhaps she should take a leaf out of his book? Or perhaps she should do what the Doctor would do. But what was that? Probably get himself captured, then get the mysterious stranger on his side to save the world. So at least she had a plan, albeit an impossible one. Impossible for anyone but *him* of course. Perhaps she should give up, slope of back to Perivale and get herself a flat over the corner shop. Perhaps she was getting too old for this game. And perhaps if she kissed Wolsey long enough he'd turn into a handsome prince ready to take her away from all this. Fat chance.

The kitling ignored all of this, all of his senses tuned perfectly on one single point, his ears swivelling forward to catch even the slightest of sounds. He could feel his heart beat speed, his pupils dilate, his mouth fill with saliva. At the foot of the statue, the winged thing seemed oblivious. Such was the skill of Wolsey the Hunter – it wouldn't see anything until it was too late, and its blood arched across the hard ground. His prey was large, yes, but it would be no match for tooth and claw. Its beak may be large and curved, but Wolsey could have his teeth in its neck before the black-eyed creature could caw in

surprise. And the winged thing's attention seemed to be directed firmly elsewhere.

With a cold unblinking stare, the raven perched at the foot of the statue, and watched Ace.

She didn't notice, her eyes still scanning round ever more hopelessly for a man, not a bird. Her mind raced with possibilities, none of which offered an immediate solution. She knew there was nothing much else she could do here, but she was unwilling to admit defeat, unwilling to run back to the Doctor with her tail between her legs and say she'd failed. If, of course, she could find out where he was. Probably at the base, but probably not. He didn't like getting cooped up, and if there was a hunt, he'd be leading the pack. No, she was being stupid, acting like a spoiled teenager. Again. If there was something odd going on, the Doctor would want to know about it: disappearances and deaths, the Doctor's meat and drink. He'd want to know.

Wolsey the Hunter stalked ever slower, ever forward, his tail flicking about behind him like a whip as he prepared for the pounce. The raven was still oblivious, its ebony eyes still fixed on Ace as she lifted herself from the bench, hand in her pocket. The Doctor would want to know, and UNIT would know where the Doctor was. Muscles tautened, and Wolsey rocked slightly back, coiling into himself ready to unwind. A second later and he would be flying through the air, claws exposed. Then his would be at the bird's throat, and it would be over. But he never made his leap, the hunt blown out of his mind as the raven changed its stare. The head turned slightly, and those cold dark eyes fell on the hunter, fixing him to the spot. For the first time, Wolsey

actually found himself afraid, afraid that his prey might be too much for him.

With an almost contemptuous snort, the bird opened its massive wings and casually flapped into the air, leaving Wolsey clinging to the earth, his head filled with pictures of the bird's talons grabbing onto him, lifting him away for its chicks to feed on. A second failure in one day. By the time he managed to come back to himself, his Sister was already across the road. She had seen nothing of the bird, or the failed hunt. He could see no reason to let her know.

Reaching the telephone, Ace pulled out the pass she had been given and dialled the number on the front. It was too long to be a telephone number, but it started ringing any way. A blurred picture of a blond haired woman stared up at Ace, sensible and starched. Thinking like a physicist. The telephone clicked as somebody at the other end picked up. There was a second's pause – they were checking their computers to see exactly where the call was coming from – and then a crisp voice said:

'Allen Demolition, can I help you?'

Somebody's idea of a joke. Ace slipped the pass back into her pocket and nestled the telephone into the crook of her neck.

'Put me through to the Doctor,' she said, matter of fact. There was a pause on the other end of the telephone, that same pause she always got whenever she mentioned the Doctor to anyone in UNIT. It was the sound of their lives, flashing before their eyes.

'One moment,' the voice said, cracking slightly.

So Ace waited as Wolsey quietly padded up to her, and let her eyes

wander again, half looking for her lost prey. And she wondered why it was she felt a thrill of fear from the kitling as her eyes fell on a huge black raven, perched on the top of one of the cafés nearby. A huge black raven that seemed to be watching her.

Manchester: 30. July 1998

15:57

The Doctor stood, his umbrella to his lips, his grey eyes looking down at the slab. Another dead body, another ruined life, another day's work waiting to be done. Sometimes he wondered how much longer it would go on being this way, before he felt he'd actually made a difference. Trying as hard as he could to hold back the tide, one day it would simply sweep him away.

'We picked him up in Platt Fields,' Jötunson said from behind him. The Doctor wasn't sure he liked the way the flame-haired soldier always lurked in the background, softly making his presence felt. It reminded him too much of somebody else. 'Local boy from the look of him. No ID. They found him with half a tree in his hand. They think he tried to protect himself with it.'

The Doctor shook his head softly.

'Such a waste.'

The body on the slab in front of him was barely recognisable as once being human. There were claw marks criss-crossing the face and hands – he'd obviously tried to protect himself by throwing his arms in front of his face. It hadn't worked. Some of the major organs were missing – how long had he

lived after they'd been torn out of him with tooth and claw? Had he felt life seeping away from him, or had shock numbed him from the terror? There was no way of telling. The Doctor hoped he hadn't known his fate, that it had happened too quick for him to register, but he guessed that he was wrong. He swore that he wouldn't let it happen again. No more bloodshed. The time had come to end it.

'The attacks seem to be getting worse. This one was practically torn apart.'

'He's losing control of it. Soon there won't be anything of him left.'

'Who?'

'Your "Beast", Captain. The creature who's behind all of this.'

Jötunson stepped into the light, his brilliant blue eyes fixed firmly on the Doctor, the light catching in his red hair. For just that moment, the Doctor was sure he remembered him, but the moment passed. He spoke firmly and urgently, and the memory faded.

'You know who's doing this, Doctor?'

His eyes in shadow, the Doctor looked down at the destroyed body on the slab. Softly, he whispered, his Scot's burr softening the hard words, his face set firm, unreadable.

'Yes,' he breathed. 'I think I've known from the start. It was obvious, this has his stench all over it. There's still some of him left, Captain. This whole thing has been set up to lead me to him, and I've spent too much time looking for another answer. But . . .'

'Doctor?'

‘If he’s gone this far, there may be no way back for him. I’m amazed he managed to set all this up, get UNIT here. He must have known you’d call me in. He wants it to end.’

‘Who, Doctor? Who are we dealing with here?’

But it was too late, the Doctor was on his knees, overwhelmed by something bigger than even him. His eyes glowed bright yellow, casting an eerie glow on the ruined wreckage of the man. He gritted his teeth against the force of it, tried to fight it, regain control, in vain. He could feel pressure in his finger tips, claws he had no right having trying to force their way through the skin. He could smell the strange mixture of emotions waving out from Jötunson – fear, panic, joy – and the stale stench of the dead body. He could smell the fresh blood pumping around Jötunson body, and felt the desire to release it, see it arch across the white tiled floor. And he could see across the miles.

‘Doctor? Are you . . ?’

‘Ace!’ he breathed, panicked.

And then it was gone, he was back in control. In a moment he was on his feet and heading for the door, his umbrella firm in a white-knuckled grip. Jötunson turned and tried to stop him with a hand on his shoulder. The weak grip was broken in a second, and the Doctor glared into the Captain’s eyes.

‘Stay here. This is something I have to do. I’ll call you when it’s over’

‘No, Doctor,’ Jötunson was firm, his jaw set. ‘This is our show. We’re coming with you.’

The Doctor paused for a split-second. More time wasted, and Ace

didn’t have much left.

‘Alright, but stay out of my way. This is between me and him.’

And with that, he stormed out of the room, leaving Jötunson to mull on the Doctor’s eyes. They were still burning an intense yellow, the pupils two long slits.

Manchester: July 30. 1998

15:45

Ace’s mind was racing. She needed a plan and fast. She’d have to find the Doctor, he’d have to know. She only hoped it wasn’t too late.

‘Dorothea?’ the voice on the other end had asked. A rich but clipped voice, full of concern. Brigadier Bambera.

‘Ace,’ she’d corrected. And then all hell had broken loose.

She needed to get to the Doctor – he’d need her. But she had no way of knowing where he was. They could’ve taken him anywhere in the city, or further with the ‘copter they had. And she was stuck here with no way of knowing. Wolsey sat crouched a few feet away, looking at her without blinking. She could feel waves of concern, fear coming in from him. Probably just reflected back from her. He was growling softly, his way of asking if there was something he could do. Perhaps there was.

‘You’ve lost the Doctor?’ Bambera had asked, concerned. Probably scared of the unchecked damage he’d cause out on his own.

Ace picked up Wolsey into her arms. He was lighter than air, all fur and muscles. He immediately started purring. She stared into his eyes, directing her thoughts at him, even though all he understood was emotion. *Find the Doctor*, she thought. *Look for him*. *Show me*.

‘And you think we’ll know where he is?’ Bambera had asked.

She felt herself go, her glowing eyes masked by the thick lenses of her glasses. She could see herself gazing down at Wolsey, her fear carved plain in every line of her face. And then she was gone, and the kitling’s *sight* stretched out across the city, searching for other eyes to see through. And it soon found them, seeing the trees they saw, the open grassland, the walls, hearing the blare of the traffic outside the park. She winced at the sound of it, harsh and unnatural. There was only one man it could be.

‘UNIT haven’t got any teams in Manchester, Ace. I’ve never heard of any Jötunson.’

Find him, Wolsey, she thought fast and strong, *take me to him*. And Wolsey jumped out of her arms, opened up part of her mind and the world went white . . .

. . . as she slid onto the dry grass, feeling it give between her fingers. She could smell the fresh scent of it, feel the electricity in the air as the storm approached. And she could smell something else – fresh blood, mixed with a scent she hadn’t smelt in . . . Part of her mind clicked, and she pulled herself quickly into a crouch, her teeth bared. Her eyes glowed bright yellow, as her muscles arched.

‘Hello, Sister,’ purred the rich velvet voice, ‘have you come to join me

on the hunt?’

And the Master crouched under the trees, still chewing the raw meat in his paw, his burning yellow eyes firmly fixed on Ace.

FIVE

Manchester: July 30. 1998

16:12

When the rain started, it came down as if it hadn't rained for a year, and it didn't know when it might get the chance to again. The city darkened, caught by an early nightfall, and droplets the size of acorns hammered down. The roads were soon slick with it, grassland the city over suddenly becoming flooded and soft. Children danced in puddles, adults hurried under newspaper umbrellas. The trees hissed with it, and rivers formed in the gutters, carrying the litter away with it.

Wolsey hated the rain. He hated the way it matted his fur, and hated the way it stole all the warmth from his body. But he stood stone still in it now, his green eyes fixed firmly on the siblingless Brother. He felt the hatred

coming from his Sister in waves, the tinge of fear, and he remembered that this Brother was the one who had taken the Sisters and their Siblings over, changing the ancient hunting grounds for new ones, just before the end. And he felt shamed.

He felt shamed because he had watched his Sister hunted by the Brother, and done nothing. He had felt the flash of adrenaline her body had produced as the Brother leapt for her, had seen through her eyes as his claws dug into her flesh, and had seen through the eyes of the siblingless Father as he had seen the two cats battle. And still Wolsey the Hunter had done nothing. Never mind that his Sister had ordered him not to with a burst of concern, never mind that a fully grown Sibling could never hope to defeat a Brother, let alone a kitten. His Sister had been in danger, and he had done nothing but watch. As he watched now.

‘Where is he, Sister?’ the Master asked. ‘Is he with you? Or has he abandoned you like he did me? No, he always had a fondness for your kind, didn’t he, Sister.’

‘My name’s Ace,’ his Sister growled.

The Master sniffed at her, smelling much what Wolsey too smelt. The rough leather of the ropes he had bound her with, the warm tang of her fresh blood as it dried on her face, the confusing mix of her heritage, both hunter and prey. And over it all, the wet overpowering stench of the rain. He smiled, revealing sharp canines.

‘Yes, but for how much longer?’ he purred softly. ‘Every battle you fight makes it stronger, and there’s no escaping it. One day it will claim you, as it

did me.'

'I didn't fight,' spat Ace. 'You did.'

'It doesn't matter any more, Sister. It's in your blood, biding its time. I thought I could escape it too, but . . . The only escape is death now, Sister. I see that.'

'You'll die too, then.'

'Yes,' he sighed, glaring up at the rain, huddling himself into his lair to keep dry. 'But I will take him with me, Sister. He will know what it is to have been the greatest of all things, reduced to a stray, skulking around the dustbins of this world. And you will help me.'

'Fat chance, kitty.'

'He'll come for you, Sister. He always has before.'

And as Wolsey the Hunter watched, impotent, the MasterBrother reached out and dragged a single claw down the side of his Sister's face. It left a single trail of fresh blood, filling the air with its delectable scent. His Sister snarled at the MasterBrother, half in pain, half in anger. Her mind, Wolsey could feel, was on the DoctorFather.

'One day, little Sister, you'll give in. You'll submit to the call of the wild, and then . . .' his eyes fell to his own claw-tipped finger, the network of hard yellow bristles poking through his ruined clothes. And he smiled at her, with teeth too big to fit in his mouth any more.

Ace said nothing.

But with her mind, she said: *Find the Doctor*. *Warn him*.

And cursing himself for a coward, Wolsey the Hunter slunk through the undergrowth, until he was far enough away the open the corner of his mind with out being seen, to feel the DoctorFather's eyes looking out at the road and to slide between the distances to join him. The world went white . . .

Manchester: July 30. 1998

14:14

. . . And Wolsey the Hunter found himself sitting on hard concrete, looking up at the road, green eyes on the four green Range Rovers pulling up to the side of the road. They screeched to a halt with a bestial shrill of terror, and their doors spewed ten of the siblingless. And there behind them was the DoctorFather, his eyes dark, barely noticing the rain, followed by the scentless one.

'The Master's the most dangerous creature this planet's ever likely to see, Captain,' the DoctorFather said. 'Leave him to me. Use your troops to keep everyone away. I don't want anyone else getting hurt.'

'Whatever you say, Doctor,' the scentless one said.

With no more time to waste, Wolsey the Hunter leapt at the DoctorFather, landing clean in his arms, claws clutching his dark jacket. If he was surprised, he didn't show it. Instead, he locked his eyes onto Wolsey's, and their sight became one.

'What is it, Doctor?'

The DoctorFather didn't answer him, but with a voice powerful enough

to control a pride of Sisters, he told Wolsey to do what his conscience begged him to. *Find her*, he said firmly, *and protect her*.

‘Ace is in trouble,’ Wolsey heard him say as he leapt out of his arms and the world went white . . .

Manchester: July 30. 1998

14:15

. . . And he found himself back on the grass, in the rain.

He felt his Sister’s presence, and her fear. The siblingless Brother was standing now, his teeth bared, his claws out to the air. His Sister was at his feet, pulling herself back, her hands tied firmly behind her back. He sent her a wave of comfort, so she knew he was back. She returned it, with an edge of fear. She knew the DoctorFather would be here soon, and she knew that he would prevail. He always did.

‘He’s here,’ the Brother said, sniffing the air. ‘He’s coming.’

‘He’ll beat you. He always has before.’

The Brother smiled again, a glint in his yellow eyes.

‘I’m counting on it,’ he snarled. ‘But I think I may have to provoke him a little first.’

He picked up the Sister easily with one hand and slit her bonds with a claw. She fell back to the muddy earth, losing her footing and finding it again in a split second. He towered over her, smiling. She didn’t stand a chance

against a Brother of such power, Wolsey knew. And if he knew it, so did his Sister. But he could still feel the adrenaline flowing through her body, feel her eyes burn as they changed, feel the snarl creeping onto her face.

‘I like to give my prey a fighting chance.’

And, with a hiss of pure anger and energy, claws extended to their full length, fur stood on end against the rain, Wolsey the Hunter threw himself onto the Brother’s face. His claws bit deep, filling his nose with the sickening tang of tainted blood, and his teeth tore a strip of his pale flesh from the Brother’s face. He screamed in anger, and batted at the kitling with extended claws. They brushed Wolsey away easily, but his firm grip brought more of the Master’s flesh away with it.

He stood, panting heavily and trying not to howl out loud with the pain of it, blood streaming down his face. He looked for the kitling at his feet, but it had picked itself up and bolted. So the cat had tooth and claw on her side – he hadn’t thought her strong enough to control a kitling. He’d been wrong. As the rain washed the blood away, only to be replaced with fresh, he looked again for his prey. She had bolted.

Slowly, the Master smiled.

‘So,’ he purred, ‘the hunt begins.’

SIX

Manchester: July 30. 1998

14:22

The Doctor raced through the rain, his feet barely touching the mudded ground. Two of Jötunson troops hurried after him at a respectful distance. The rest had stayed to cordon off the park. Nobody got in, nobody got out. It ended here, and now. His hearts raced, and he could already feel his lungs burning. His eyes were a bright glowing yellow, but he no longer cared. Something was wrong. He could feel it in his bones.

He was afraid, and he was too late.

He couldn't feel the Master in his mind, but it didn't matter. He knew where to run. He'd seen his lair through Ace's eyes, seen the bestial remains of a once proud Time Lord pouncing on her like a mindless plain's lion. He'd

felt the overwhelming desire to tear flesh from bones that had flooded the Master's mind. If he'd had time to think, perhaps he would have wondered that such a shadow of the Master could have prepared such a careful web to bring him to Manchester, but he didn't have time. He was too concerned for Ace, too afraid for what he might do. And he was too late.

He saw the mound by the lake immediately. A mass of damp blackness, turning the mud a deep rich red, the rain hammering down all around it. He saw the small wet shape of the kitling frantically trying to lick life back into her. Her face was cut, and her flesh was ragged. Her jacket had been torn clean off her back, and one arm was obviously broken, bent behind her back in a sickening shape. She was obviously dying, her face pale and her yellow eyes barely open. Her broken sunglasses had shattered into her face, blending with the claw and tooth marks.

'Ace,' he breathed. She didn't move.

The soldiers arrived ten seconds behind him, but he was already by her side, checking for any signs of life. They tried to get closer, but a small black cat with jade green eyes stood at the Doctor's back, hissing at them louder than the rain. Despite his small size, neither of them wanted to go anywhere near him. The Doctor was a frantic whirlwind of motion as they watched, his hands first here then there, desperately trying to grasp the life that was slowly seeping out of his friend. It was a losing battle.

'Doctor?' she breathed painfully.

'Shh, Ace. Shh.'

'He's turned, Doctor. It's . . .' she coughed up blood, and the Doctor

tried not to let himself wince. ‘It’s taken him.’

‘I know. I know.’

She lay, dying. Her breath rasping, trying not to swallow the rain, her own blood.

‘What colour’re my eyes?’ she asked.

He looked into her burning yellow eyes, and said softly:

‘Brown, Ace, brown.’

‘Good,’ she said, and closed her eyes.

His own eyes glowing into the darkness, the Doctor was all activity again. He lifted Ace into his arms – trying to ignore how desperately light she was – and handed her to the startled Privates. Wolsey was still hissing at his feet, and the Doctor did nothing to stop him. He spoke to the Private holding Ace.

‘Be careful with her. Get her to a hospital. I’m trusting you.’

And just for a moment, the Private understood what a truly great thing that was.

‘Look after her,’ said the Doctor as he hurried off into the rain.

Foolishly, the soldiers thought he was talking to them. But Wolsey knew the truth.

Manchester: July 30. 1998

14:27

The Doctor strode through the thin copse of trees that divided the two fields, ignoring the rain that hammered down through the patchy cover, ignoring the brambles that caught at his coat. His face was set, his eyes were two suns casting strange shadows on his face. His mind was made up, he knew what he had to do.

He could feel the adrenaline rushing through his body, feel its dangerous passenger gradually changing his very being. He even began to think he could feel little yellow hairs pushing their way up through his skin, itching on his arms. Normally when he felt himself going, he could hold it back, if he concentrated hard enough. Normally he would think calm thoughts to bring him back from the brink, before he toppled over that edge, the one not even he would be able to climb back from. Now, all he could think of was Ace, lying, bleeding every precious drop of her life into the mud. He should have stayed with her, but he knew the Master was waiting for him.

‘It ends now,’ he said out loud.

There was no reply.

‘I’ve let you get away with too much, in the past. I’m covered in blood you’ve spilt. No more.’

Only the rustle of the trees, and the static hiss of the rain.

‘Come on! Isn’t this what you wanted?’

And then the trees burst open, and a smear of black launched itself at the Doctor.

He was knocked backwards by the sheer force of it, landing awkwardly across a broken tree stump, feeling the rotting wood splinter into his back. He could smell the flesh and blood on the Master's breath as he lay on top of him, snarling. His hair was lank and unkempt, full of leaves and grass from his life in the rough. His face was scarred with the wounds of his battle with Ace and Wolsey. The Doctor found himself hoping that she had hurt him a lot. He saw himself reflected in the glowing yellow eyes, and knew he must look the same to his foe.

'Ah, Doctor,' purred the Master, 'how good of you to join me. How's that little kitten of yours?'

The Doctor pushed his attacker away, with an effort, and sprang to his feet. He could feel his strength growing as the virus took hold. And he could smell the blood on the air. It made him growl with anticipation.

'I'm not playing your games any more,' he snapped. 'It ends here.'

'Good, good. How fitting that it should come to this after so many years, eh Doctor? How many times did I try to destroy you with cunning and guile, only for animal strength to do the job for me.'

'You've not killed me yet!'

The Doctor flung himself at the Master, and found himself on top of him, fighting the urge to lick his bleeding face. The Master fell easily, his legs twisting beneath him. It was as if all the strength of his first attack had melted away, leaving him defenceless as a kitten. But still he grinned his unnerving smile, canines glistening in the rain.

'Who said anything about *me* killing you?'

And suddenly the Doctor realised, but it was too late. The Master reached up and clamped his hands onto the Doctor's arms, the claws digging deep into the flesh. There was no way the Doctor could pull away, he was trapped in the Master's grip. And now he knew why the battered creature was smiling.

'You've realised, haven't you Doctor. Too late, as always. Can you feel the virus coursing through your veins? Bonding with your adrenal glands, such as they are? It's semi-sentient, you know. Those Cheetah fools never realised, but I did. I felt it, invading every little thought I had. It got so that all I could think about was tearing you apart with my bare hands, eating you alive. It does that to you, changes your thoughts so you fight more and more, each time making it stronger.'

'Let me go.'

'It's too late, Doctor. You're lucky I came to my senses in time – you can fight it for a while, if you're strong. I realised the only way to be free of it was to die. You're little kitten managed to help me there.'

The Master rolled slightly, still gripping the Doctor with all of his strength. Now the Doctor could see his foe's back clearly, and he could see the broken bottle sticking out, slicing cleanly into his primary heart. No, he corrected himself, only heart. His body was from Traken now, and they only had one heart. The Master was as good as dead.

'But I couldn't let her finish me. I knew you had to be there for that, Doctor.,' the Master smiled, as the Doctor made one last effort to pull free. 'Stop struggling, Doctor. The virus knows I'm dying, it's already preparing to

leave. And you're the only other host around here.'

And then the Doctor finally realised that he was doomed, and the Master began to laugh.

Manchester: July 30. 1998

14:35

The Private pushed his way through the trees, his eyes peeled for any sign of the "Beast", or the Doctor. The blood on his uniform was slowly mixing with the torrential rain, staining the whole thing a faded claret. He held a pistol in his hand, and prayed he'd have enough time to use it if a giant cat leapt out of the undergrowth.

When he saw the Doctor, he was knelt in the mud, blood streaming all over him. In front of him was the battered and broken body of a bearded man, dressed entirely in rags of black. His knees sank into the mud. The rain lashed down around him, on him. It soaked his hair, into his jacket. The water on his face, though, was his alone.

'Doctor?'

'He's dead.'

'Doctor,' he managed to say again, before the wind stole the rest away.

'We went to the Academy together,' said the Doctor, not even caring if the soldier was listening, whether he could hear or not. He wasn't talking to him. 'We grew up together, we worked together. Then we grew apart.'

‘Doctor!’ the soldier yelled over the growing tempest, but could get no more out. The rain dashed the words to the ground in an instant.

‘But we kept meeting, again and again,’ the Doctor continued, oblivious. ‘And there were fireworks: we were an explosive combination. In the end, he was the one who really knew me the most. I must have thought he was dead a thousand times over the years. Now I know.’

There was a rush of air, and a bright burst of white light. When it died, the Master’s broken body was gone, transported away by a final burst of viral energy. He could’ve headed for anywhere from Salford to Skaro, the Doctor didn’t know which. The wind lulled for a moment, spent perhaps, or gathering itself for another assault. The soldier took his opportunity:

‘Captain Jötunson sent me, Doctor. He says you should know,’ he paused, breathing. Could he hear him? ‘Ace is dead, Doctor.’

And the Doctor through back his head, closed his glowing yellow eyes, and howled long and hard, the sound floating up past overgrown canines and up into the dark sky.

SEVEN

Manchester: July 30. 1998

14:40

Jötunson strode through the storm, barely even feeling the rain. It seemed to avoid him, as if even it was scared of him. His blue eyes danced this way and that, searching for something, masking a mind moving faster than the speed of light. His eyes fell on the Private, kneeling alone on the ground, eyes open wide, pistol by his side.

‘Well?’ asked Jötunson.

‘He’s dead.’

His blue eyes danced, his heart skipping slightly.

‘The Doctor?’

‘No, the Master.’

A sigh of relief, blown away by the wind.

‘Where is he?’

The Private looked up into the Captain’s eyes. He had a look that said he had seen too much, something that no-one of Earth should have to see. A look that said he would never fight again, for UNIT, for anyone. A look he would keep in his eyes until the day he died.

‘He had to go,’ was all he would say.

Jötunson jaw set, and his eyes blazed bright. He nodded firmly, with a quick glance around.

‘Come on, Private,’ he snapped. ‘We’ve got to move out before six. Orders from HQ.’

But the soldier didn’t move. He was still there when Bambera and her team arrived to work out what exactly had happened. He wouldn’t speak to any one in her team, except for one woman, dressed entirely in black. And he only spoke to her because she had the same look in her eye.

Stockport, July 30. 1998

17:35

He drove his car like he lived his life – fast, and with no regard for anybody else. He was on his way home from the city, having spent another eight hours feeding his bank account. One day, he’d run the firm and his life would suddenly become a lot more complicated. It would be a lot harder to

make time for the women, the parties, the drugs when he had important work to delegate. But that was at least a year away, plenty of time to worry about that later.

He was just haring down the A6 when he saw him, standing by the edge of the road. He was getting soaked by the rain, but he didn't seem to notice. His dark jacket was torn and smeared with mud and what could have been blood. His hat was battered and torn, much like the Paisley scarf he had tied around one of his hands as a makeshift bandage. His other hand was held out with a hopeful thumbs up.

You'll be lucky, he thought as he saw him. Until he saw his eyes.

'Where're you going, mate?' he asked, once he'd pulled over.

And the Doctor looked at him with slate grey eyes, and pointed down the road.

GEMSTONE

Little Sarfield: August 7. 1998

21:57

The room was dark, despite the light the fire threw out. He sat hunched over his game, folded into the armchair and forgotten. His hat sat by the table, watching its owner lose, conferring with the umbrella that lay beside it. His dull grey eyes stared at the board, as if willing the next move to make itself known. Nothing changed.

On the board, the battle limped on, nearing an end. A single pale knight sat protecting his king, nearly overwhelmed by a sea of dark forces. Behind him, two castles tried to provide shelter for their king, but to no avail. The pale knight's dark opposite was waiting, ready to capture the king and end the game.

There was a knock on the door. He ignored it.

‘There’s no-one in,’ whined Tim.

Walker kept knocking. Tori held herself closer to Tim, stepping under his up stretched arms and the shelter of his raincoat umbrella. The rain was hammering down now, and the house’s gothic facade offered them no shelter. It glared down at them with shuttered eyes, its warming fires held deep within its heart, its doors firmly locked. For just a second, Tori had thought that it had been growling at them, but that had just been thunder.

And Walker kept knocking.

‘Perhaps no-one lives here,’ suggested Tori.

‘We could try another house,’ suggested Tim.

‘Someone lives here,’ snapped Walker, ‘and there aren’t any other houses.’

And Walker kept knocking.

Then, a shape appeared behind the frosted glass - small and dark. The door opened a fraction, and a small strangely dressed wire haired man stood glaring at them. Tori smiled disarmingly. Walker stopped knocking. Tim stood forward to take charge, and rain dropped onto Tori’s exposed back.

‘Hello, sorry to bother you but our car’s broken down.’

‘Leave,’ said the strange little man.

‘No,’ Walker told him.

‘We only want to use your phone,’ said Tori.

There was a moment that passed - Tori felt it. The stranger's eyes barely connected with her or Tim: they passed fast over the small brunette and her tall shaven-headed lover. But when they rested on Walker, they drank in every detail. His raven black hair, his piercing green eyes, his long rat-like face, even the dark leather he wore: the stranger saw them all. A light from somewhere caught his eyes, glinting yellow.

'You'd better come in,'

'That's better!'

The stranger dropped himself back into his chair, looking like he hadn't moved for centuries. All around them, ghost books stared at them from oak panelled book shelves. On the board, the battle remained frozen in time, waiting.

'So, you play chess then?' asked Tim.

'I used to,' the stranger replied, darkly. 'My opponent's dead now. I hope.'

'Oh, I'm sorry,' he flustered.

'What happened?' Tori asked sympathetically.

The stranger looked up at her with two cold grey eyes. He looked like he was deciding how much he could tell her.

'An old school friend,' he said softly, 'died recently. An infectious disease. Very infectious.'

‘At least he got to finish the game,’ Tori ventured, her eyes on the board. The stranger stared at her: ‘That is check mate, isn't it?’

‘No,’ his eyes were on the board, ‘there has to be a way out.’

A look between Tori and her lover.

‘Listen,’ said Tim, ‘if you’ll just show us where the phone is, we’ll get out of your hair.’

‘I haven’t got a telephone,’ the stranger said. ‘That’s why I’ve come here. To get away.’

‘Oh.’

‘Well, do you know where the nearest phone is? We really need to get our car fixed.’

‘How long have you known your friend?’ the stranger asked Tori.

‘Tim?’ she answered, pulling herself closer to him. ‘We’ve been going out for near three years now.’

‘No. The other one.’

‘Walker?’ answered Tim. ‘We’ve only just met him. We picked him up in Nottingham. Needed a lift to London. Why?’

‘Because he’s missing,’ the stranger told them.

Their heads snapped around, to discover it was true. Walker had gone, without so much as a sound. Tim, ever practical, opened the door and looked around. There was no sign.

‘Perhaps he’s gone to find the bathroom?’ suggested Tori.

‘Perhaps,’ said the stranger. His tone of voice suggested that he didn’t

hold out much hope.

‘Great,’ said Tim. ‘What are we going to do now?’

The stranger stood, picking up his hat and umbrella. Dropping the hat onto his head, he said:

‘I’ll go and find him.’

He headed to the door, stopped as if remembering something. He turned back to Tori, solemn.

‘Don’t go outside,’ he warned. ‘This is a very old house: it’s not safe to wander around in. She’s never really liked strangers, and she’s been acting very strangely recently. Probably my fault.’

And with that, he left, closing the door behind him.

‘Oh good,’ said Tori, and lowered herself into the stranger’s chair.

A darkened corridor, much like any other: the requisite two walls, floor and ceiling, dotted with unopened doors, a thousand opportunities. Somewhere above, a dim light glows, but that isn’t much to distinguish it from any other.

Then, something different: a short man, hat on head, umbrella in hand. This is something new.

‘Chile?’ he calls. ‘I’m here. We can talk.’

There is, of course, no answer: this is, after all, merely another seemingly endless corridor, dimly lit, empty of life. The small man grumbles off

down the corridor, mumbling to himself. A brief occurrence, but it did pass the time.

Another corridor, equally dimly lit, better populated. Let's watch. At first it seems perfectly similar to any of the others, but a couple of seconds pass and a partnership appear. The tall man strode forward, his shaven head glinting in the dim light. Behind him followed a small brunette with dull brown eyes. Strangers.

'He said we shouldn't go wandering around,' Tori reminded Tim.

'He also said his house was acting strange. I don't think he's got his full complement of marbles.'

'I don't like the idea of creeping around a strange house.'

'Look,' Tim said, looking her in the eyes, 'it'll take us a couple of minutes to find Walker, and then we'll get out of here. I don't like this place any more than you do, but we can't just leave him here without a ride.'

'I suppose,' Tori agreed reluctantly.

'Good. Come on.'

Skulking down corridors, the man in the lead, the woman behind. They call something. A name. They're searching for something, poking heads round corners, opening doors. Strangers. They're the ones. Strangers. They won't find it. They can't have it. Strangers.

'Walker?' Tim called.

The gloom ahead was impenetrable. He could only just make out a corner, a bend in the corridor. There didn't appear to be any doors. But was that something? A dark shadow just on the back wall? Perhaps . . .

'What?' asked Tori.

Tim strode ahead.

'I think I see him. Walker?'

Five paces between him and the corner. Tori hurried her pace. Tim strode on, oblivious.

'Walker? It's us.'

Four paces. Something shifted behind the wall. Tori felt something in her shift. Three paces.

'We're getting out of here. You still want a ride?'

Two paces.

Then something happened. The shadows leapt out at Tim before he could even stop striding. He paced right into the thing's waiting grasp. Tori screamed. She managed to catch sight of claws, shredding through Tim's body as he screamed in pain. She saw glinting teeth as they sank into her lover's neck. She saw blood spurt.

Then she saw glowing yellow eyes as they looked up at her.

The human body is a remarkable thing. It has been centuries since there were any predators big enough or savage enough to pose a threat to it, yet still it retains its instincts. Adrenaline floods the body, the pupils expand, drinking in every detail of the danger. Power courses through the veins, and

the brain makes a simple choice: fight, or flee.

‘No,’ breathed Tori, and fled.

‘Chile?’ the Doctor hissed.

There was no answer. He was growing tired of pacing around his own house looking for a stranger. He had more important things to be doing - he had a game of chess to be getting on with.

‘Chile? I’m not looking for you any more. If you want me, here I am.’

He stopped dead, arms folded, eyes glaring into the gloom. The corridor was silent.

‘I haven’t got all day.’

Footsteps coming towards him. He grinned, unfolding his arms and resting on his umbrella. The footsteps were coming closer, fast. Chile was running. He must be eager.

A door burst open and Tori came tumbling through it, falling at the Doctor’s feet.

‘I thought I told you to stay put,’ he chided.

The fire in the drawing room blazed fiercely. The chess board sat in the corner, waiting. The door swung open, and the Doctor and his guest walked through it.

‘It killed Tim!’ Tori was shouting as she stepped through.

The Doctor remained impassive.

‘You brought it in with you.’

‘It’s going to kill us all,’ she said, falling into the chair.

The Doctor strode over to the fire. The flicking flames cast dark shadows in his eyes. For just a moment, Tori was more afraid of him that she was of the creature outside. His shadow covered the back wall: books with dusty spines disappeared into its darkness. He didn’t move from the fire as he said:

‘No. It’s looking for me.’

Then, without warning, he crouched by the fire and thrust his hands into the dancing flames.

‘Jesus!’

He seemed to grope in the coals for a moment, then withdrew his hands: old, lined hands, not burnt in the slightest. Sitting in their rough grasp sat the biggest, greenest gemstone that Tori had ever seem in her life.

It was about the size of an ostrich egg, and roughly the same shape. It had obviously been cut at some point in its life, the sharp facets sending the firelight dancing and twisting in every direction. And the colour! It was the green of sunlit afternoons in the country, of childhood tree-houses, of lime jelly at a fifth birthday party. It was beautiful.

‘What is it?’ breathed Tori.

The Doctor rose, the green light dancing around his body.

‘It’s the emerald heart of Kotchi the Deathless, a gift from some grateful friends, and the creature outside wants it.’

‘What are you going to do?’ she asked.

The Doctor looked grim.

‘Give it to him.’

Walker stood in the corridor, his long leather trench coat wrapped tight around him. The corridor seemed to growing steadily dimmer. He sniffed. He could just make out the scent of . . .

‘Chile,’ the Doctor said, stepping out of the shadows.

‘Hello, you,’ he replied.

Tori appeared.

‘Walker? You know him?’

Walker smiled, eyeing the gemstone in the Doctor’s hand.

‘We have old debts to settle.’

The Doctor took a step forward.

‘I would have paid you. There was no need to bring the heavies with you.’

‘The creature has nothing to do with me.’

‘And you expect me to believe that?’

‘This is an old house.’

Walker held out a hand for the crystal, but the Doctor stepped back, his

finger against his lips.

‘What if I ask you to get rid of the creature first?’

Chile smiled a thin smile. Tori shivered, but the corridor wasn’t cold.

‘You’ve already had your boon for that payment,’ Chile smiled again, ‘unless you care to make another deal?’

‘No,’ the Doctor conceded, and tossed the crystal.

It sailed through the air quietly, twisting twice before Tori leapt up and snatched it away. Chile glared at her.

‘I haven’t had my boon yet,’ she snarled. ‘Kill that thing.’

Walker stepped forward menacingly. His hand were reaching towards Tori. The Doctor took a protective step towards Tori.

‘I . . .’ began Chile, and then all hell broke lose.

Without any warning, the creature appeared. The Doctor got a glimpse of a powerful feline body and fierce yellow eyes as it leapt through the air, knocking him aside. As he picked himself up, he saw it pounding towards Tori, its teeth bared.

‘No!’ he shouted, but it was too late.

A powerful claw flicked at her, catching her arm and sending her spinning into a wall. She slid down it, dazed and bleeding. The creature paid her no attention. Its eyes followed the gemstone as it flew out of Tori’s hand and span through the air. Before it landed it was moving, sleek and fast.

The gemstone bounced once, before a hand shot down and grabbed it.

The creature paused, its slit eyes glaring at Chile. He glared right back

at the dark feline form.

‘This stone is mine by right,’ Chile snarled. ‘If you want it, you will have to take it from me.’

The creature pulled itself into a pouncing position. Chile glared at it. Beneath its dark fur, muscles rippled. Its pupils contracted, focusing on the one thing that stood between it and what it wanted. Its lip drew back, revealing sharp teeth. A low, inhuman growl came from deep in its throat. Chile growled right back.

The Doctor leapt in and grabbed the gemstone from Chile’s hand.

‘Doctor!’ Tori screamed.

The creature looked up at him, confused.

‘Fetch!’ called the Doctor, and threw the crystal away.

The creature dived after it, scooping it up in its powerful jaws and leaping straight at a wall. The wall rippled, and the creature leapt through it into nothing.

The threat gone, the Doctor hurried over to Tori.

‘Are you alright?’

‘My hand’s bleeding. I’ve hurt my back.’

‘You’ll be alright.’

‘You owe me my payment,’ snarled Chile, towering over the Time Lord.

The Doctor smiled disarmingly.

‘I have paid you. In case you didn’t notice, the creature stole your property. I suggest you take it up with it,’ the Doctor paused, his hands

stemming the flow of blood from Tori's damaged hand. 'It's already killed once, presumably because it thought it had found you. I'm sure it would love to see you again.'

'Payment is still due,' Chile said firmly.

The Doctor glared up at Chile. The Time Lord's eyes glowed a bright yellow, and he snarled a bestial growl at the man. Chile took a step back, surprised, and conceded:

'I'll return another time to collect.'

With that he turned around and hurried away, heading for the front door. Tori looked up at the Doctor, and said:

'What the hell is going on here?'

The Doctor looked grim.

'That,' he said, 'is exactly what I'd like to know. Come with me. I'll get your hand cleaned up and get you on your way.'

In the drawing room, the fire still burnt brightly, although there was no-one there for it to warm. Yet.

Slowly, the far wall began to ripple, and the dark feline creature leapt through into the small room, the gemstone resting in its mouth. Its yellow eyes flicked cautiously around the room, before it paced over to the fire and dropped the gem back in. The gemstone disappeared into the dancing flames, as quickly as the creature dived back the way it came and vanished.

With the stone returned, the fire burned as the house settled, contented.

THE RIDDLE

PROLOGUE

London: August 3. 1998

15:23

She sat in the room, quietly waiting. She knew what was going to happen, and she knew exactly what she was going to be asked. And she knew all the reasons why she couldn't answer even one of them. She'd been here before, more than once.

The door opened, and Brigadier Bambera paced in.

She looked like she hadn't slept in a couple of days, which was probably the case. Her uniform was – as ever – immaculate, but there were rings under her dark eyes, and her face was set sterner than usual. She looked down at the woman in black before her, not expecting a salute. She wasn't disappointed.

‘We’ve gone over this Manchester event with a fine tooth comb,’ she said, sounding for all the world as if she was reading from a prepared speech. She knew the drill, too.

‘And?’ the woman in black said, already knowing the answer.

‘D-Division say its got all the symptoms of a classic Police Box Incident.’

The woman nodded, said: ‘Lot’s of dead bodies and nobody knows exactly what happened.’

Bambera took off her hat, ran a hand through tight black curls. There was a touch of grey starting to show at the temples – the lifestyle getting to her at last. The light glistened off the wedding ring she wore, reflected in the woman’s eyes. She didn’t look her commander in the face, concentrating instead on the threads in her own black overcoat. She knew what was coming.

‘Geneva’re worried,’ Bambera said quietly, ‘We’ve got ourselves a highly motivated, highly organised, well equipped team that say they’re UNIT, and nobody anywhere have heard of. We’ve got a lot of dead bodies, and the Doctor’s involved somehow. It wasn’t that long ago they shut UNIT down, for less than this. We’re only here on sufferance. And we’ve got this phone call from –’

‘From Ace,’ the woman interrupted.

Bambera sat right in front of her, demanding her attention.

‘We were thinking you might be able to shed some light on it.’

The woman shook her head slowly.

‘Sorry,’ she said, and meant it. ‘We went through all this with the Broken Arrow. I can’t tell you anything.’

‘Not even a hint?’

‘Only what you’d do anyway,’ she smiled apologetically. ‘Stay on alert. Have a team ready to move in. Eyes and ears.’

‘And you’re still off active duty? Both of you?’

The woman in black nodded, resolute.

‘Shame,’ breathed Bambera.

And from somewhere below them, the soft sound of purring filled the air.

ONE

‘*For many years, the United Nations Intelligence Taskforce protected the world from alien invasion, and set the foundations for our own FHD divisions. But for all these battles, it was not an alien threat that signalled the end of UNIT: it was the enemy within that destroyed them*.’

The Zen Military

Kadiatu Lethbridge-Stewart

Little Sarfield: August 9. 1998

16:21

The Doctor sat cross-legged on the lawn, his back to the House and the sun on his face. His eyes were closed, his attention focused deep inside himself. It had been a long time since he had meditated this deeply: perhaps since he was trying to force the anger at his exile away, or back before then,

as he perched on the side of Mount Lung and tried to please his master. Now, he had no choice. He was fighting to claw his life back.

He tried to ignore how good the sun felt on his skin, tried to ignore the urge to stretch out and curl into sleep. Tried to ignore the urge to leap up, and run forever, and to feel the blood rushing in his ears, smell blood set free on the wind. He tried to focus on what made him him, tried to remember the thoughts he had before they were invaded by pictures of prey fleeing across the plains. It was getting harder, his self becoming obscured by a red mist.

His eyes flicked open, and he reached for the guilt-edged mirror at his side. He glanced briefly at the face he saw, and let it slip from his fingers again. His eyes still burned a vicious yellow. As they had for the past week or more.

Somewhere, a raven cawed. It sounded like laughter.

Scratch meditation. He hadn't had much faith in it working – if it was that easy, the Master wouldn't be dead now. He would have tried that – he would have tried most things the Doctor could think of. He would have tried *everything* the Doctor could think of. There was no escape, except the route the Master had taken. And he wouldn't have chosen that if he could have seen another. Perhaps it was best just to give in, sit back and let it take him. At least the he wouldn't know when . . .

A dark shape in the sky, flapping up from the village down below.

No, that was not the way to think. There was another way out. All he had to do was to find it. Perhaps if he could isolate the invading virus, he could extract it from his system, give himself a spring clean. He was sure

there was something in the TARDIS that could do it for him. But the TARDIS was in Manchester, and he couldn't bring himself to go back there just yet. Not after Ace.

Flying up and out of the valley, away from the small cottages of Little Sarfield, clearing the trees that separated them from the world outside, the dark bird gathered speed.

No, that wouldn't work anyway. The Cheetah Virus was now firmly bonded with his adrenal glands – or their Time Lord equivalent. If he tried to extract the virus that way, he'd take half his sympathetic nervous system with it. Of course, there was always the possibility that he'd grow another. In fact, that was the one option that the Master hadn't had open to him. A regeneration would completely rewrite his DNA, and an outsider like the virus might find itself left out of the equation. And that would have the advantage of relieving him of the crushing burden he was starting to feel, the terrible weight of history. He was getting so tired.

The raven was moving fast now – it had already crested the brink of the valley, and passed the road that twisted its way through the trees back down to the village. Now it was flapping its steady way over the small cottage at the beginning of the House's grounds: the caretaker's cottage, empty for the last eight years. And still the Doctor failed to notice it.

No. Giving up was not the way. Especially if he wasn't sure it would work – the Virus was so ingrained in his genetic make-up, there was a chance the nanosubs in his blood would just think it was part of him. One regeneration wasted, and still infected. No, he was running short of new bodies as it was.

There had to be another way. Had to be. But all he could think of was the Master, and the way out he had been forced into.

And then instinct kicked in. His hearts started pounding before he even knew why, his pupils closing to two small slits in his glowing yellow eyes. He felt fangs push his mouth into a snarl, and his fingers tensed as he tried to extend claws that weren't there. Not yet, anyway. And still he had no idea what had sparked it off, until his eyes lifted to the sky. The raven was nearly on him, hovering over him like a shadow, blocking out the warming sun. Without even thinking, he brought himself into a crouch as the bird dived passed his head, nearly taking his hat with it.

As he spun around, the bird was gone. Instead, he found himself staring at a tall, shaven-headed man dressed entirely in black. He wore a pair of small black shades, given the Doctor the impression that he had no eyes, just two black shining holes drinking him in. His hook nose bore an uncanny resemblance to a bird's curved beak.

'Doctor?' he asked, matter-of-factly.

It was all the Doctor could do not to pounce on the stranger, tear his throat out with his new sharp fangs. He just stayed crouched on the ground, staring up at him as he stared down.

'Well?' the stranger snapped.

The Doctor nodded slowly, fighting to regain control. To no avail: he could feel the hairs on the back of his neck starting to rise.

'Good,' the stranger said, and pushed a needle into the Doctor's neck.

He was still cursing his reflexes as everything went dark.

TWO

The Sarfield Dales: August 10. 1998

03:45

In the moors of the Sarfield Dales, there is a petrol station. Barely a car a day goes by, but whenever one does the driver sees the same thing: the young owner of the station sitting on his chair, waiting for customers. The stations two pumps are spanking clean, and the prices are off-puttingly high, but the competition is non-existent and he has to make a living.

Sometimes, such as now, a large unmarked van winds its way up from the valleys and pulls into the station. No matter how often the owner sees that van, his hand always drops down behind his chair, fingering something unseen.

‘Mind if I smoke?’ the driver asks.

‘Can’t smoke here. You’ll blow us all up,’ answers the owner.

The driver nods.

‘Can I smoke round the back?’ he asks.

The owner nods - his hand rising away from the back of his chair, relaxed - and the driver and his companion climb out of the van, heading round the back. Normally. This morning, the driver adds:

‘Got a delivery for you. Give us a hand?’

Again, the owner nods, and helps carry a large box inside his station: a long and coffin shaped box. This done, the driver and his companion climb back into their lorry and, without a thought for the cigarette they never smoke, they drive off again.

The owner relaxes back into his seat, his eyes on the road. Tomorrow, another lorry will come, with a different driver, but it doesn’t concern him. Tomorrow, there will be another owner.

The Sarfield Dales: August 11. 1998

09:32

When the Doctor woke, he decided it would be best to keep his eyes shut until he knew more about his situation. Some feline instinct raged at that. If there was danger, he should face it head on, eyes wide open, not try to hide from it like some cowering kitten. He held it in check though – noting with no slight pleasure that the teeth in his mouth were no longer fangs (although, a

small part of his mind whispered, he could guarantee his eyes were still glowing). He put the thought to the back of his mind, and went through his standard abduction check list.

Check One: he was still in the same physical condition in which he'd been kidnapped – no missing limbs, no mystery drugs floating around his system. Good.

Check Two: he was naked. Not good. There were some very useful things for escaping from most situations in his pockets, and a naked man was easier to spot than a clothed one. He'd have to steal some kind of uniform when he escaped. He hoped that his hat was alright – it had been a gift from an old friend. He'd have to find it, later.

Check Three: he was in a confined space. He could feel it in the air. And the floor was made out of some kind of glass.

'Hello, again, Doctor Smith,' said a measured voice that made the Doctor's hackles rise. 'How are you feeling?'

The Doctor opened his eyes – no need to pretend he was unconscious any more. He saw that his first impression was right. He was trapped, locked inside a six foot glass globe, perfectly smooth in every direction. Which was worrying – was fresh air getting pumped in somehow, or did he have to conserve oxygen? He couldn't see any air vents, so thought it best to start slowing his metabolism down. The virus inside him fought against that, too – it was busy trying to raise his heart rate, get him ready to fight his way out.

Not yet, he thought.

Looking passed the glass, he could see he was in a basement

somewhere – an underground base, perhaps? Definitely military, or a specific branch of the military. UNIT. He didn't need to work very hard to deduce that. Standing right at the edge of the glass, was a tall figure glaring down at the Doctor. Despite the curve of the glass, the Doctor could make out the uniform, and the blue beret. But he could make out much more than that. The broad shoulders, the neatly shaved flame red hair, the brilliant blue eyes.

'Captain Jötunson,' the Doctor said, surprised at how little his voice echoed in the cage.

'You remember me,' he beamed. 'I'm touched.'

He doubted he would ever forget. But things were going awry – last time they'd met, the Captain had been helping him. Now he him captive. Why the change? Too many questions. What he needed was more information, time to find out what Jötunson was planning. Once he knew his plan, he could find the flaw in it and defeat him. It never occurred to him that their might not be a flaw, or that he might not prevail. He was the Doctor – that was what he did.

'Well, Doctor Smith –'

'Just Doctor,' the Doctor interrupted.

'I'm sorry?'

The Doctor stared at Jötunson through the glass. Where was this going?

'I prefer just the Doctor.'

Jötunson looked confused – real, or feigned? With the glass in between them, the Doctor had no way of knowing.

‘But Doctor Smith is your name, isn’t it? Doctor John Smith?’

And just for a moment, the Doctor caught the glint in Jötunson blazing blue eyes. A glint that said he knew damn well it wasn’t the Doctor’s real name. A glint that dared him to deny it.

Blank faced, the Doctor said:

‘Of course.’

And Jötunson merely nodded, and left the room.

Manchester: August 9. 1998

14:56

As Ace slid back into consciousness, her senses were overwhelmed by the smell of fish. Haddock, possibly Hake. Then her ears were assaulted by a thunderous rumbling, and all she could think of was Ben Hurr rowing his warship up to ramming speed. Then – gently, ever so gently – she felt a velvet tap at the very top of her skull. A well chosen spot, probably the only place on her entire body that wasn’t blazing with pain. But then the creature who’d chosen that spot would know that.

Her eyes flicked open, and she was greeted with the sight of a black kitten perched on the side of her bed, carefully avoiding the drips coming from his Sister’s arms, practically grinning all over his face. His whiskers twitched as he sat back. She’d reach up to stroke him, but she just didn’t have the strength.

‘Hello, Wolsey,’ she croaked, and that set the purring off again.

This was what her life had degenerated into over the last week. A nurse would wander into the room, give her some pain killers. Sometimes she’d take them, sometimes she fake it. Either way, within an hour she’d be asleep. When she took the drugs, she didn’t dream: that was the one thing they had in their favour. Then, some time in the afternoon, Wolsey would appear and wake her up, usually smelling of whatever dinner he’d been able to catch that day. She’d say this for the kitling – she never once had to buy him a tin of Whiskas. Not that he’d eat it if she did, for much the same reasons as Ace herself had for going vegetarian. Processed meat tasted nothing like the real thing.

She sent a wave of gratitude towards the kitling, and felt it reflected right back. She had a lot to thank Wolsey for – without the ability to watch the outside world through his eyes, she’d be climbing the walls by now. Even as it was, her muscles ached for activity, and every little thing could get the adrenaline flowing, her heart racing. But even then, the pain was always with her – they assured her it would pass with time, that she was passed the worst of it, but still . . . She should be grateful the UNIT troops got her to the hospital in time – another half an hour and she might have been dead.

A picture of the Master, claws out, fangs bared, coming for her.

And then she remembered – not UNIT troops. UNIT knew nothing about them, or their commander, Captain Jötunson. These soldiers were impostors. Even if they had saved her life, even if they had tried to stop the Master, even if they had helped the Doctor. And they were still out there

somewhere. Manchester, England, the world. They could be anywhere. She hadn't seen hide nor hair of any of them.

Wolsey twitched on the bed, then in the blink of an eye jumped off and away. She could feel him in her head, arriving somewhere in Moss Side, hissing at the local strays. Then she was distracted, as the door to her room swung open. It's him, she thought. He's turned up at last. About time too.

A nurse wearing a starched uniform and a frown bustled into the room with Ace's dinner. Her heart fell. It wasn't him. Again.

'Dinner, Miss McShane,' Ace winced. 'You missed it when everyone else had theirs.'

Ace did her best not to struggle as the tray was placed over her legs and her bed was hoiked up into a sitting position. The nurse took the opportunity to cast a critical eye over Ace's wounds – she didn't seem too disappointed with them. And she never once asked how she'd managed to get mauled by a big cat in the middle of Fallowfield. Not that Ace was particularly feeling like going through the whole story again. She'd told the soldiers what had happened, and Jötunson had taken it from there – even going so far as to explain the colour of her eyes to the hospital, and tell them not to think too much about it. Another mark to the impostors.

'The doctor'll be doing his rounds in a few moments,' the nurse said, and stupidly Ace felt her heart skip. 'I'm sure he'll be happy with your progress.'

Then her face changed. A look of half confusion, half disgust appeared, as her hands fumbled with Ace's pillows. She withdrew a dainty gloved hand,

holding the still struggling remains of a half pawed mouse. The nurse looked for all the world as if she was about to faint – despite the fact that Ace had looked far worse than the mouse when she'd been brought in. Wolsey, Ace thought, and tried not to smile.

'What?' Ace croaked. 'You let other patients have flowers.'

The nurse had still been frowning as she'd bustled out again, leaving Ace to wonder what had happened to *her* Doctor. When would *he* come visiting, on his rounds? Would he ever?

Sarfield Dales: August 11. 1998

21:32

The Doctor was impressed with Jötunson precision: exactly twelve hours later, he marched back into the room. The Doctor knew it was exactly twelve hours. He'd counted every second of them. There wasn't much else to do.

'Doctor Smith,' Jötunson nodded.

The Doctor said nothing this time, his favourite trick. Most captors liked the sound of their own voices, and if they had a plan they just couldn't help blurting it out. In his considerable experience, that was. Never mind that the virus was clawing at the back of his mind, begging to take over. Never mind that it swore it could smell something different about this one, that his captor had no scent. It struggled with the Doctor, desperate for him to make a leap for the Captain's throat while he still had the strength. But still the Doctor

remained silent.

‘I see,’ said Jötunson, making for the exit.

Scratch one plan, thought the Doctor.

‘Wait,’ he called. Jötunson paused in the doorway. ‘Aren’t you going to ask me anything? No impossible demands, no goading? No boasting that at last you have me right where you want me?’

Jötunson turned around, a smile spreading across his pale face. A smile that under other circumstances might be considered charming.

‘Is that what you’re used to, Doctor? You’ve been working too hard – you’ve rid the universe of all but the most clichéd villains.’

That surprised the Doctor, although he couldn’t pin down why. Was it the way he said “universe” instead of world, or was it the plain acknowledgement of his villainy?

‘What is it you want?’

‘Just one thing, Doctor,’ Jötunson said, leaning in until his nose touched the glass cage. ‘The answer to a simple question. Is John Smith your name?’

And again the glint was there in his eye. Even though he couldn’t see the harm in the question, the Doctor knew he couldn’t tell him the truth. Not if he ever wanted to escape his cage alive. There would be another way. He would find it. It was what he did.

‘Absolutely,’ the Doctor said, avoiding the Captain’s eye.

‘I see you’ll need some time to think it over,’ said Jötunson, heading

again for the door.

‘Wait,’ called the Doctor. ‘Aren’t you even going to feed me?’

But Jötunson had already gone.

THREE

The Sarfield Dales: August 23. 1998

05:32

Time Passed.

The Sarfield Dales: August 26. 1998

17:01

The Doctor thought.

Manchester: August 27. 1998

13:00

Ace started to feel better.

The Sarfield Dales: September 2. 1998

01:13

The Doctor starved.

FOUR

The Sarfield Dales: September 5. 1998

14:32

The Doctor felt quite well, considering. His skin was turning a pale shade of grey, and looked thin as parchment, while his wiry black hair was falling out in chunks. It covered the glass floor of his cage, crept into his mouth when he slept – or, more accurately, when he lapsed into unconsciousness. His ribs were pushing tight against his flesh, his entire body little more than a carcass, skin stretched tight over fragile bones. His clear grey eyes were slowly turning into dried, rheumy balls. Yes, considering he'd had neither food nor water for longer than he could remember, he felt quite well.

'Doctor Smith?' said the Private, sitting with his back against the far wall, his eyes everywhere but on the Doctor. He was the latest in a long line of

soldiers: many different faces, always the same question.

And all the time, the voice nagged in the back of his mind, clawing at his control. This was no way for a hunter to die. A hunter should die with his enemies' blood on his lips, racing across the plains after his prey. A hunter should *live* as it died, one last burst of wild freedom. Not trapped in a cage, pawed at by a thousand people, treated like an animal, not a hunter. The urge to throw himself at his attackers was overwhelming, but still the Doctor sat patiently cross-legged, saying nothing.

Out of his line of sight, a door opened. There were a few measured steps, and Jötunson face loomed at the glass.

'How's our guest?' he asked.

The Private looked awkward, avoiding his Captain's eyes.

'In a bad way, sir,' he mumbled. 'Perhaps we could get a doctor –'

Jötunson interrupted:

'Has he said anything?'

The Private shook his head, went back to staring at the walls. Jötunson shook his head slowly, then leant his head against the glass. For a moment, the Doctor gazed deep into his tormentor's deep blue eyes and saw . . . something. Half a memory jogged, but refused to take shape. Then Jötunson blinked, and the moment was gone. All he could see was his own blazing yellow eyes reflected back at him, and the blood pumping through his prey's body.

'You're not thinking, Doctor,' Jötunson spoke softly, so that only the Doctor could hear. His voice travelled easily through the thick glass. 'You're

the only one here who knows how long you can last. To be honest, we all expected you to die last week. We're flying in the dark here: we just assume you won't let yourself die, but if you do . . .'

Jötunson shrugged, and turned away. The Doctor's eyes stayed fixed, staring straight ahead.

'Let me know if anything changes, Private,' Jötunson barked, heading for the door. 'Goodbye, Dr Smith.'

Half a sound, nearly a word. The sound of a bone dry throat trying to force out words. Jötunson turned.

'I'm sorry?'

The Doctor coughed, clearing his throat. His voice cracked, and he winced at the pain, but still he forced the words out. He knew he had no other choice: he'd wasted too much time already.

'That isn't my name,' he said.

Jötunson smiled. Now they were getting somewhere.

'Then what is your name?'

The Doctor stared into his eyes, a challenge: 'You wouldn't be able to pronounce it.'

'Why not?'

There was a catch in the Captain's voice. The Private's attention was fully on the shattered remains of the creature in the cage. This was what they'd been waiting for. This was what they wanted. Now let's see what they'd do with it.

‘It’s not a human name,’ he said. Jötunson merely nodded.

He turned to the Private, who had leapt out of his chair in triumph, barely restraining himself from clapping his Captain on the back. Jötunson was, however, calm as ever. His eyes sparkled, but the rest of his face betrayed no sign of emotion.

‘Go and inform the Sergeant that the prisoner has identified himself as a non-human being,’ the Private saluted and hurried out of the room. Jötunson turned to the Doctor and said, almost sympathetically: ‘Now the kid gloves come off.’

The Doctor said: ‘Why are you doing this?’

And for a moment, the mask fell. Jötunson lowered himself to the floor, his eyes locked on the Doctor’s. He put a hand up to his shorn head, and asked softly:

‘How much have you worked out?’

Silence. The Doctor considered carefully.

‘You’re not part of them,’ he said. ‘You don’t want the same thing. They want me, you want something from me. You . . .’

The Doctor’s voice cracked, and he stopped, leaning his back against the glass wall. He was exhausted, and even he couldn’t be sure how much longer he could last. He was pinning all his hopes on Jötunson wanting him alive, but a true hunter should never need to gamble that way. He should risk all in the hunt, not in captivity.

‘You’ve hardly got any of it,’ Jötunson said, sympathetically, and reached into his pocket.

His eyes stayed locked on the Doctor's as he withdrew his hand, clutching something the Doctor nearly remembered. A large, over-sized playing card, with a patterned back. He felt something shift in his head, and felt snow against his face. With a swift flick of the wrist, the Captain sent the card spinning towards the glass of the cage. Just as it should strike and bounce away, somehow it fluttered through, landing in the Doctor's lap. He looked at Jötunson, unable to ask.

'Breathable glass,' the Captain explained. 'It keeps its structure only as long as I want it to. A bit of an anachronism, but I was hoping no-one would notice.'

The Doctor looked down at the card in his lap. A picture of a one-legged man, hanging upside down from a tree. He was struggling to get out of a straight-jacket, a magician of some sort. In his hand, he carried an umbrella with a handle that was a red question mark. *The Hanged Man* from a Tarot deck. The symbol of regeneration. The Doctor looked up at Jötunson, and finally the memory came back to him.

'Good, you remember. I thought you never would.'

'I didn't expect such a slow promotion,' the Doctor croaked. 'Thirty years?'

'Time is relative, Doctor.'

The Doctor leaned forward in his cage, nearly collapsing with the effort. He whispered softly, but the sound still carried.

'Why are you doing this?'

Jötunson stood, brushing down his uniform, and smiled. All

compassion was gone from his face, the mask slipping back into place.

'I'll tell you what, Doctor. I like a good game, so why don't we make a challenge of it? You answer my riddle and I'll let you out of the cage, free to go. How does that sound?'

The Doctor nodded, eyes on eyes. Jötunson leaned in again, forehead to glass.

'Why am I doing this?' he asked.

The Doctor's head dropped, and Jötunson smiled.

'Think about it,' he said, and marched out of the room.

Moments later, the Private returned, armed with more questions for the Doctor to ignore. His mind was elsewhere, now. He had a riddle to solve.

Manchester: September 5. 1998

13:21

There was a loud tick, and another second passed.

Ace watched the other patients from behind her sunglasses. Every half-hour or so, one of them would get called away – directed to the doctors' rooms or wheeled down to radiography. Nothing exciting enough to be called an event. Sometimes one of the patients would look at her – cautious but friendly glances, wondering who she was waiting for, what was wrong with her: if they could see the bandages beneath her badge-covered jacket, they wouldn't need to wonder. Whether because they couldn't see eyes under the

sunglasses, or because of something in the way she sat – poised, impatient, tense – nobody spoke to her.

From the outside, the hospital was an old fashioned kind of place – all square windows and marble columns. It looked like the designer's intention had been to scare disease out of those weak-willed enough to succumb. From the inside, it looked much like any other hospital: antiseptic white and full of tired eyed people, waiting for the worst. She saw a young girl, probably the same age as her, hand in hand with her small boy. It made her think of Wolsey.

Another tick, and another second past.

The kitling was prowling again, in some overgrown back garden down Longsight way. There was a female cat with him that held a new fascination for him – he was growing up fast, losing the layer of fat that kept him warm when he was a kitten. His body was growing leaner by the day, his eyes growing keener. And he was starting to want his privacy: Ace backed out of his mind, sending a wave of apology.

Not that the kitling wasn't concerned for her – he often joined her on her vigil – he despised the waiting. The inaction tore at every fibre of his being, leaving him desperate to escape, to hunt, to live. Not that it was doing much for Ace, either.

A tick, a second, gone.

How dare he do this to her. Her, of all people. Leave her stranded like this, miles from anywhere and anyone she knew. Miles and decades. If it wasn't for the credit card Jötunson had left for her, she would have been out

on the streets. Another point to the impostors.

She knew what had happened – he'd got too involved dealing with the Master, perhaps even Jötunson and his team too. He'd forgotten all about her for the time being, lying recovering, useless, in a hospital bed. So what if he hadn't done it before – it was just another sign of how distracted he'd grown recently. Planning something big, no doubt.

Any moment now he'd waltz in through the waiting room doors, twirling that bloody umbrella of his, grinning that inane grin. And when he did, Ace would give him the hug of his lives. Then she'd kill him.

Tick.

A nurse spotted her from the other end of the room – perhaps the same one who'd looked after her before? It was hard to say: the time she'd spent in her private room remained a haze in her mind, a mixture of drugs, fatigue and boredom. Either way, she seemed to recognise Ace. A little sigh, putting down her clipboard, pacing over to Ace's little plastic sheet. The young woman did her best to ignore her, pushing her sunglasses further up her nose.

'Miss McShane?'

'Ace,' she growled.

The nurse put her hands on her hips and cocked her head to one side. Yes, she was the same one: that particular gesture stuck in Ace's mind. She'd seen it often enough.

'Didn't we discharge you last week?'

Ace didn't catch her eyes, just tried to sound resolute.

'I'm waiting for someone.'

‘The same someone you were waiting for yesterday? And the day before that? And –’

‘Yes,’ Ace interrupted, hoping to suggest that that was the end of it.

‘Isn’t there somewhere else you can wait? We need to keep this area clear for patients.’

Ace looked up at her, wondering if she could see the glow behind her dark glasses. She tried to keep the snarl off her face, but not too hard.

‘He’ll be expecting me here,’ she said.

‘Have you ever thought that he might not be coming?’ the nurse asked, not too unkindly. Ace said nothing.

With a final entreaty to her covered eyes, the nurse wandered away, said something to the receptionist. Ace didn’t care. She settled back in her chair, to wait, willing to wait until she qualified for a pension if that’s what it took. The Doctor would be coming for her, and she had to be here when he did.

A tick, and time passed.

The Sarfield Dales: September 5. 1998

15:34

Time passed.

Every ten minutes or so a new soldier would enter the room and ask him a long list of questions: how did they get into his TARDIS, how did they fly

it, what was he doing on Earth, where were the rest of his people, when would the invasion begin, so on and so on. Ten minutes later, and a new soldier would enter, the old one leaving without a word, and without an answer.

The Doctor sat in a tired lotus, his eyes closed, trying to concentrate. He ignored every outside distraction – the relentless drone of questions, the way his skin was starting to tear and bleed. He'd lost a tooth not half an hour ago, and felt a pang of guilt at how good the blood felt throbbing down his dry throat. The trickle had soon stopped, that well nearly dry. Only you know how long you can last, Jötunson had said, but it wasn't true. The Doctor had long ago passed the point where he could judge his own chances.

It didn't matter. He had to focus all his energies on solving the Captain's riddle. Something in the way Jötunson had offered him that small hope made the Doctor realise it was the key to everything: his capture, his starvation, his infection, everything.

Given time, he was sure he could solve it. Given time, and a clear head. Even now, the insidious voice of the Cheetah in him pleaded. It begged him to fight, to die with dignity and freedom. It howled to feel flesh between its teeth, to have its thirst slaked by somebody else's blood. It demanded Jötunson, fleeing for his life across the plains, all in vain. It interrupted every thought the Doctor had now, stopping him from making the connections he needed, stopping him from planning. There was something bigger here than UNIT, bigger than him, and Jötunson was the key. Jötunson was . . . what *was* Jötunson?

The Doctor knew he had to find the answer, but all he could see was

himself, tearing at Jötunson throat with a Cheetah’s teeth.

He settled back, and time passed.

FIVE

Manchester: September 6. 1998

08:15

Ace sat, watching a small knot of patients slowly build into a sea. She had been there since seven now, and still the numbers were growing. They'd reach a lull by the afternoon, ready to build again by evening. Once the pubs closed, they'd reach a peak – both physically and vocally – and Ace would take that as a sign to pack up and go to her hotel. Six hours sleep and then back to the hospital again. The first routine she'd had in nearly four years.

She could see the receptionist eyeing her – an old woman with a bouffant of white hair piled up on her head. There was a look on her face that Ace couldn't read, something that softened her eyes and loosened her jaw whenever she looked her way. Ace tried to ignore it. Instead, she kept her

eyes firmly focused on the door, while the eyes in her head stayed fixed on the road outside.

It was a rare moment of stillness for Wolsey – perched cautiously on a chair outside the new pub. It was mostly frequented by students, and a couple of doctors, but it afforded a perfect view of Oxford Road. If the Doctor walked that way to the hospital, Wolsey would spot him and Ace would be out there in a second. But he hadn't walked by yet, and Ace could feel Wolsey's muscles starting to ache for a bit of excitement. But still the kitling stayed motionless, green eyes on the passing world.

'I thought you might like this,' said the receptionist, suddenly blocking Ace's view of the door.

She was stood right in front of her, that look on her face again, holding a cup of tea right under Ace's nose. She could smell powdered tea, powdered milk, fluorides in the water. Fighting back the urge to hiss that the surprises gave her, Ace nodded and took the cup gingerly. She didn't dare let herself smile, in case she was showing more tooth than she should, but did manage a cheerful grin. At least, it seemed cheerful from her side of it. Whatever, it seemed to please the receptionist, who beamed back in response.

'I shouldn't worry, love,' she said. 'He'll turn up in the end.'

Of course he will, Ace didn't say, merely nodding.

'Not a man on this earth that likes visiting hospitals.'

And at least one not from this Earth with a similar reticence. She took a sip from her tea, risking a broad smile. No screams, thank God.

'Just let me know if there's anything else I can do,' the receptionist

said, a hand on Ace's shoulder. For a moment, she looked surprised by how firm the muscle was under the nylon jacket.

'Thanks,' Ace said, and was surprised to find she meant it.

But she didn't say another word to the receptionist for the rest of the day.

Manchester: September 6. 1998

09:30

'Ace, forgive me,' Jötunson said in his unidentifiable accent. 'I . . . well, I've put this off too long.'

He stood, ramrod straight in his blue naval uniform, just like the first time she'd seen him, cap under his arm at the Brigadier's funeral. He had marched through the waiting room doors just a few seconds ago and, with a quick nod to the receptionist, had strode straight over to Ace. Almost as if he'd known exactly where she'd be.

Ace tried to keep herself calm, barely batting an eyelid as she called Wolsey to her. A pause, and then the kitling was crouched by her legs, waiting to leap up at the Captain. She could tell he was spoiling for a fight, glad of some action after a morning watching people hurry by. Even so, he'd managed to miss Jötunson – perhaps he came in through the A&E department on Upper Brook Street. Or perhaps Wolsey wasn't as vigilant as he should've been.

A quick flash of shame from the kitling, but all the same he was defiant:

if the Captain had approached passed him, he would have seen him.

‘I know who you are,’ Ace said. She could feel her heart racing, her eyes turning. There was a part of her that wanted Jötunson to react badly, just so she could pounce. Wolsey wasn’t the only one who wanted to shake off a few cobwebs.

A slight twitch from the Captain, that was all.

‘I beg your pardon?’

Time to hit him with the big guns.

‘I rang UNIT. They’ve never heard of you.’

‘Ah,’ said Jötunson, looking nervously around him. ‘Do you mind if we discuss this somewhere a bit more . . . private?’

So they’d adjourned to the pub. They sat in the upstairs area – the smoke downstairs offended Ace’s delicate sense of smell – Jötunson with his back to the emergency exit, Ace carefully positioned with her eyes on the road outside, and the main stairs on one side. If need be, she could be out of there in ten seconds. Not that she showed it – she sat relaxed, a glass of water on the table and a sleeping Wolsey sitting on her lap. As she spoke, she absent-mindedly stroked his soft black fur. He purred slightly, but never once stopped watching Jötunson slit-eyed.

‘Well?’ she asked.

Jötunson took a sip of his drink – some Germanic beer or other. Ace could never get used to the taste, even before Wolsey. He put it down, and fanned his hands out on the table in front of him. It was a strangely disarming gesture.

‘I am connected to UNIT,’ he said, carrying on swiftly as Ace raised an eyebrow, ‘but most of the British HQ wouldn’t know it. I’m the head of a special force, set up by Geneva, and to take orders only directly from them. Foreign Hazard Duty division – FHD. We look out for hostile aliens and we neutralise them.’

‘I thought that was UNIT’s job,’ Ace said archly.

‘Sort of, yes,’ he admitted. ‘But we’ve got authorisation to use slightly more . . . specialised techniques.’

‘Like using the Doctor to hunt down the Master?’

‘Ace, there’s something you need to know.’

‘Where *is* the Doctor? Has he sent you to pick me up?’

Jötunson face fell, and Ace knew. She could tell in the way he looked into his beer, danced the glass around the table. Wolsey pricked him ears up, hearing his Sister’s heart skip a beat. He could feel the lump forming in her throat, the sting in her yellow eyes. She knew already, but even so she refused to believe it.

‘We managed to corner the Master, after we found you,’ Jötunson was saying. ‘The Doctor was very upset – he cared for you a great deal.’

‘Cares,’ Ace heard herself saying, from the end of a long corridor. ‘He cares for me.’

‘There was a fight. A big one. There was nothing we could do, Ace. They were both . . .’

Jötunson trailed off, but Ace wasn’t listening. She was too busy watching her world crumbling around her ears.

Manchester: September 6. 1998

13:15

Ace sat on a bench in Whitworth Park, Wolsey at her feet – alternately looking up at her, and glaring at any passer-bys who got too close – and her back to the art gallery. There was a blank look on her face as her sunglasses stared out of the giant grey statue in front of her. Pigeons danced on his shoulders, not caring who he was, or how important he'd been. In her hand, there was a key.

'I have to get back to London,' Jötunson had said. 'Make a report to HQ, then Geneva. You could come, if you'd like.'

The whole pub had stared at her, silence dropping over them like a net. Their drinks had shattered on the floor as she dived across the table to get at his throat. Her vision had been clouded red, adrenaline coursing through her veins. She'd hissed, she'd bared razor sharp canines, her sunglasses falling from her face, as she'd threatened to kill him for lying, for not telling her, for letting it happened. Then there'd been tears, and he'd wrapped strong arms around her, taking her head to his chest. His cold blue stare had embarrassed the entire pub into turning away.

'I want to be alone,' she'd said, fragile.

Jötunson had nodded, understanding.

'You've still got the credit card?' she'd nodded. 'Use it to pay for a hotel – any price. We'll find you that way.'

And then she'd come here, to the park, to be alone. And alone she

was.

Wolsey had tried his best to comfort her, trotting quickly after her, running in and out of her legs, trying to trip her up. He'd lay on his back at batted at her bootlaces in that way that she had enjoyed when he was just a little kitten, but still she wouldn't respond. Instead, he'd settled back to guard her – sensing the overwhelming desire not to be troubled emanating from her. Birds sang in the trees, but he didn't go to chase them. Children played in front of him, but he didn't hiss, not unless they got too close. Despite days spent doing nothing, despite the desire to stretch the last week's waiting out of his legs, Wolsey sat motionless, and waited for his Sister to make her move.

'Take care of her,' Jötunson had said as he left, bending down to try and stroke Wolsey. The kitling had hissed, trying to catch the Captain with a claw, but he pulled back too fast. Ace paid it no attention, perhaps assuming he was confused by the grief pouring out of her, perhaps not caring. 'Take care of yourself.'

It wasn't a warm day, and Ace hadn't eaten. Her arms were a mass of Goosebumps and her stomach complained. She didn't notice. The world around her watched itself reflected back in her sunglasses, never making a move towards her, those that did quickly retreating in the face of tooth, claw and fur. In the end, they all left her alone. All alone.

Manchester: September 6. 1998

19:59

Ace sat, motionless, Wolsey sat at her feet watching the night.

The evening had come and gone without event, the sky gradually shifted from blue, to red, to black in what seemed like seconds. Despite the darkness, Ace still wore her glasses, still clutched at the key in her hand. She didn't notice the moon rising high in the sky, or Wolsey's frequent bursts of worry as the night got colder. He could keep away any attackers, but the cold was a prey he couldn't defeat, try as he might. He was just beginning to plan desperate action, when it happened.

Ace's eyes glowed bright, burning even through her sunglasses, and it *hit*.

Without realising, she was on her knees, her mouth pushed into a snarl by the extended canines now resting there. Her heart pounded hard, ringing in her ears and making her stomach somersault. Her body flooded with adrenaline, making her muscles scream to race to the other side of the world. It felt like she was dying, like she was flying, like she was alive at last. And when she opened her eyes, she could see somewhere else.

Her world was six feet round, enclosed in glass that turned everything else into vague swirls of colour. It was dark, almost impenetrably so, but she knew that was more to do with the condition of her eyes than anything else. She felt weak, her mouth dry, felt trapped, felt the urge to fight her way out of her cage. But where would she go? How could she escape? Fear and doubt gnawed at her mind, whilst the urge to hunt burnt in her soul.

‘Ace,’ she felt his dry throat rasp, tearing itself to blood.

‘Doctor,’ she whispered back.

She felt a wave a relief, although whether it came from him or her, she could never tell. Then, as suddenly as it had come, the vision was gone, and she was alone again. But not forever.

Realising the strength of the vision had knocked her to the ground – how long had it been since they had done that? – Ace jumped to her feet. She was already running when she sent a wave of urgency to Wolsey.

Find him!

And within a second, the park was empty.

Edale: September 6. 1998

21:03

Ace couldn’t sit in a seat, so instead waited by the doors, pacing up and down. The train was nearly empty – nobody travelled down to London at this time of night, they were all busy coming back – but she still managed to get a couple of strange looks whenever the buffet trolley went by. There were only five minutes until the train hit the station, but each second of them seemed like a lifetime. She wished, not for the first time, that she could’ve jumped in with Wolsey, but that would only leave her trapped in the same cage as the Doctor. Wolsey couldn’t even jump the Doctor away – he wasn’t prey, he was hunter and he needed his own kitling to do that. So as it was, all Wolsey could do was watch.

She could feel him, in the back of her mind, his eyes on the Doctor, on the soldier barking questions at them. He used the Doctor as a shield to stop the soldiers seeing him – he was growing more cunning with every day – but even so, he had to keep perfectly still. He could practically feel the Doctor's hearts beating through his paper-thin skin. The Doctor might not be dead, but he was very close to it. Every second would count.

'So how are we feeling?' she heard a voice say, and it took her a couple of seconds to realise it was actually Wolsey who had heard it.

The Doctor didn't move, just sat breathing heavily, his hearts pounding hard. Ace couldn't see, but she guessed that his eyes were closed. She willed Wolsey to move where he could get a view of the speaker, and the kitling tried his best. There was something in the voice she recognised.

'How much longer are you going to keep this up?' Jötunson. It was starting to make sense now. 'There's still time for us to save you, if you'll be reasonable and answer our questions.'

Still the Doctor remained silent. There was a sickly grey sheen to his skin that worried Ace. She wondered what they'd done to him, wanted to tell Jötunson that every inch of pain the Doctor had felt would be revisited on him. And she wondered why the Doctor didn't do anything, had let himself get into this state.

Through Wolsey's eyes, Ace could see that Jötunson was smiling. The soldier behind him, however, could only see his back.

'You can't keep it from us forever, Doctor,' Jötunson said. 'We'll find your invasion force, and we'll defeat them. You might as well tell us.'

Invasion force? What was he talking about?

Jötunson leaned in: ‘Come on, Doctor. Cat got your tongue?’

And then the train pulled into the station, and Ace was out of the doors as soon as they would open. Because she was paying attention to where she was going, she completely missed Jötunson dropping a large wink for only Wolsey to see.

Sarfield Dales: September 6. 1998

21:29

Ace saw the fence, judged how easily she could slip over it. She saw the gravel on the other side, considering how much damage it would do when she landed. And she saw the guard, pacing up and down, rifle in hands, and called Wolsey to her. Time to get to work.

He appeared quickly, his mind on the job in hand. Ace barely had to tell him what to do: he already knew. As he slunk towards the guard, Ace tensed her legs, testing her strength. The grass under her feet was slightly damp, but she knew she wouldn’t slip. A sky full of stars watched down at her as she gazed down the hill at the base. It was the only thing in the surrounding countryside, the hills and valleys almost designed to hide it from view. It had the look of an old fifties base – and Ace had seen plenty of those in her time – that had been left to rot, out where no-one could see it. But now lights burned in nearly every window, and the filth of forty years neglect was slowly starting to be cleaned away.

Wolsey had already scouted the area for her – she knew the base in front of her was just the tip of the iceberg. Below ground, there was more – huge workshops (in one of which sat the TARDIS and a team of scientists), barracks, armouries and the Doctor's cell. Above ground was where Jötunson office was located. Ace had a choice: rush down to the Doctor, see what she could do; get hold of Jötunson and force him to set the Doctor free. She thought she knew which she would do.

The soldier spotted Wolsey, looked around to see if anyone was looking, and tutted him over. Ace was off.

She barrelled down the hillside at an amazing speed, her heart barely ticking over, her legs feeling like they'd been meant to do this all her life. As Wolsey sauntered over to the soldier, he crouched down and started to scratch behind the kitling's ears. The fence started to loom up on Ace. Wolsey started to purr, and Ace prayed the soldier couldn't hear how fake it sounded. The kitling rolled over onto its back as the soldier started rubbing its stomach. With a minute effort, Ace pushed and soared into the air, clearing the fence and rolling without a sound to her feet on the other side.

Looking quickly left and right, Ace hurried towards Jötunson office. With a quick turn, Wolsey was on his feet and striking out with a well timed claw. As he bolted off into the darkness, the soldier screeched and pulled his hand back, sucking the blood from his palm. Looking around, he couldn't see the cat, nor its owner, bolting away silent and sure-footed.

Picking up his rifle, he went back to his patrol.

Sarfield Dales: September 6. 1998

22:01

With a soft kick, Ace managed to get the door to Jötunson office open first try. Wolsey followed close behind as she padded into the opulence.

The walls were panelled with dark oak, and every chair was leather. There were row after row of books on the walls – Ace pulled a couple out and saw texts on the Norse Eddas and quantum engineering. The carpet was rich and plush, a deep claret on spoiled by a shattered glass at one end, a drying burgundy stain spreading slowly out. The desk at one end of the room was spotless, except for a telephone on one corner and an ornate chessboard on the other. Studying them, Ace noticed that the pieces were characters from Norse mythology. The black king was missing. Beside the desk, there was a door which Ace hoped lead to a bathroom – the Doctor would need water when he was set free – but seemed to lead nowhere.

Without pausing to be puzzled by this, Ace tried all of the drawers in the desk, and finally found a half drunk bottle of Evian and a Mars bar. Pocketing these for later, Ace started investigating further. She was just running through the filing cabinet, when she heard Wolsey starting to hiss, his ears pricked up. Ace listened carefully. She could hear footsteps approaching, slow measured steps. Jötunson.

It was time to get started.

SIX

Sarfield Dales: September 6. 1998

8:15

Jötunson sat behind his desk, a pile of papers sitting on the table in front of him. Various reports to be passed on to his backer, requests for more staffing, more funding. He wasn't really paying attention to it: today was the last day for his little venture. By this time tomorrow, UNIT would have found out and the gig would be up. The resulting investigation would lead to UNIT being disbanded, for the second and final time. Ironically enough, Jötunson own actions would prove beyond all doubt that the threat of foreign activity was serious, however, and most of UNIT's staff would be commandeered when the FHD division were set up for real. Everybody was happy, except for his backer of course. But he was sure he'd grow used to prison food

eventually.

No, things were growing to a head, exactly as planned.

But there was still work to do – the Doctor's companion, for example, had to be talked to. By rights, he should be just catching the train up to Manchester now, in time for their meeting, but he just couldn't see the point. Since it was the last day, he could afford to let the mask slip a little. So he'd made other arrangements. His eyes slipped to the heavy wooden door in the corner of the room, carefully shut, carefully locked.

Which gave him a little extra time to himself to relax, as best he could. With a quick flourish, he signed all of the papers in front of him – one of them, perhaps a joke, perhaps not, he signed with his real name. He didn't smile: he rarely had any facial expression when he was alone. Instead he settled back in his leather chair and put his arms behind his head. Deep inside his blue eyes, universes were being born.

Manchester: September 6. 1998

09:30

'Well?' Ace asked.

They were sat in one of the city's many pubs – relatively new, looking like it had just dropped onto the road by the hospital. Jötunson had sat facing the bar at one of the tables by the window, knowing how relaxed Ace would feel if she could watch the exits, keep an eye out for an ambush. She wouldn't expect a one man assault. Jötunson took a sip of his drink – a German beer

he had developed a taste for in . . . how many years ago? He put it down, and fanned his hands out on the table in front of him: a carefully planned disarming gesture.

'I am connected to UNIT,' he said, carrying on swiftly as Ace raised an eyebrow, 'but most of the British HQ wouldn't know it. I'm the head of a special force, set up by Geneva, and to take orders only directly from them. Foreign Hazard Duty division – FHD. We look out for hostile aliens and we neutralise them.'

A slight lie: he supposed he could have said 'The idiot I've managed to convince I'm right works for UNIT' but he doubted it would have the same effect. And as for the truth . . .

'I thought that was UNIT's job,' Ace said archly.

'Sort of, yes,' he admitted. 'But we've got authorisation to use slightly more . . . specialised techniques.'

'Like using the Doctor to hunt down the Master?'

He took a sigh, and looked into Ace's eyes. Here it comes.

'Ace, there's something you need to know.'

'Where *is* the Doctor? Has he sent you to pick me up?'

And he said what he knew he had to say, another line in the script over with:

'We managed to corner the Master, after we found you,' Jötunson was saying. 'The Doctor was very upset – he cared for you a great deal.'

'Cares,' Ace said, her hands obsessively running through her kitling's

fur. ‘He cares for me.’

‘There was a fight. A big one. There was nothing we could do, Ace. They were both killed. I’m sorry.’

She sat looking at him, shaking her head. He could see her muscles tensing, knew what was coming next. He put his beer down carefully, his own muscles starting to dance beneath his blue uniform.

‘No,’ she said.

‘I’m sorry, Ace. The Doctor’s dead.’

And her kitling dropped from her lap as she exploded forward, over the table in a second, the drinks crashing to the floor. Her eyes burned yellow, and he held their stare. He saw the fangs in his mouth as she hissed at him, and knew they could easily cut through the flesh of his neck, leaving him gasping for breath and dying. She slammed into him, and he held her easily, swaying back slightly to make it look like she was overpowering him. Another second, and the rush of the attack was gone, and there were tears streaming down her face. He put an arm around her.

‘He can’t be dead,’ she said softly. ‘He can’t.’

He said nothing, holding her to his chest until the tears dried up. All the time, his eyes were on the little kitling, still climbing on Ace’s vacated chair. His eyes burned a vicious green, and his claws were out, ready to strike. Jötunson manoeuvred Ace in between him and the mass of tooth, claw and fur. Carefully, he reached into his pocket, pulling out a small key.

‘Here, Ace,’ he said firmly. ‘The Doctor had made some arrangements. He wanted you to have this.’

Ace pulled back, fought to stop the tears. Her eyes were a clear dark brown, red around the edges.

‘What is it?’

‘The key to a flat,’ Jötunson said, pressing the key into her hand. ‘In Perivale.’

Ace looked at the key in her hand, and burst into tears again. Jötunson took her in his arms again, but this time his eyes were on a heavy wooden door in the side wall of the hospital. Just a few more minutes, he thought, and turned to catch the kitling glaring at him still. Feeling brave, he stuck his tongue out at it.

Sarfield Dales: September 6. 1998

12:30

Jötunson sat at his desk, slowly picking at the plate in front of him: chicken, salad, a white wine and grape sauce, and a glass of burgundy by his elbow. He knew it went against etiquette, but he preferred the dark, dry taste of a red to the airy, vaguely fruit taste of a white. And after all, they were his taste buds. As he dropped fragments of the food into his mouth with his fingers – he’d spent so many years without cutlery, it was an effort to use it these days – his eyes were on the chessboard at the corner of his desk.

White was winning, having moved black into a position where, although he was still active, he couldn’t hope to win. He’d lost all of his knights though, and that was a worry. But not too much, though: he had a pawn waiting at the

other end of the board, one move away from being a knight reborn. As he reached across to pluck the black king – Odin, Allfather of the €sir – his elbow nudged the glass of wine from his desk. It hit the carpet, finding something hard there, shattered. The deep red wine soaked into the carpet, staining it blood red.

Best leave it, thought Jötunson. Don't want to get my hands dirty.

There was a knock at the door, and Private Hicks hesitantly entered the room.

'Yes, Hicks?'

He looked nervous, bless him. Who'd have thought such a quiet little boy could bring down such a grand scheme as his? But only with the right guidance, of course.

'It's about the house guest, sir,' Hicks stuttered.

'Is he alright?'

A glint appeared in Hicks' eye, and for the first time Jötunson could truly believe this was the man who would inform UNIT, throwing his career onto its spear for the sake of one man.

'No, sir. I think he's dying. I thought perhaps we could get some food to him?'

'No, Private,' Jötunson said, dropping a morsel of chicken into his own mouth. 'I don't think we could.'

'We won't find anything from him if he's dead, sir,' Hicks snapped.

Jötunson leant carefully back in his chair, giving a grin that was nearly

a snarl.

‘Are you questioning my command, Private?’

And for a full thirty seconds, Hicks stared deep into his Captain’s eyes. Only he alone knew what he saw there.

Sarfield Dales: September 6. 1998

20:42

‘What in God’s name do you think you’re doing?’

Jötunson flinched at the sheer volume of the General’s voice: a thousand decibels at least, fed directly into his ear by the telephone. He leant back in his leather chair, nestling the receiver into the nape of his neck. With a practised gesture, he kicked both legs up onto his desk, the one on the other. He let his eyes wander as he lowered his tone of voice: placating with an edge of fear – let the General think he had him.

‘I’m sorry, sir,’ he said, ‘but I thought this was what we wanted?’

He could practically hear the General’s face turning purple.

‘What I want, *Captain*,’ he spat the word out, letting it rest in the air for a second. ‘What I want is proof of an alien conspiracy. We want this creature to talk.’

‘We’ve already got the documentation, sir. A self-confessed alien, amazing powers, advanced technology, the whole she-bang. And for nearly a decade he’s been infiltrating UNIT, right under your nose, sir.’

He tried not to smile. He needed the General just annoyed enough to question his motives, just what exactly he was doing.

‘And the rest of it?’ barked the General. ‘How am I supposed to take the FHD idea to Geneva without an imminent invasion to force their hands?’

Jötunson beamed broadly, the smile drawing only a confused look from his dark companion, standing by the bookcase, silent as the grave.

‘I guarantee you, General, the FHD division *will* be operation by next year,’ Jötunson placated, failing to add: ‘With Brigadier Bambera at its head.’

‘With no confession from our Guest, Captain?’

‘You’ll get your confession,’ snapped Jötunson, his voice growing hard.

‘That’s not what I hear, Captain,’ Jötunson motioned to his dark companion to fill his glass. A little more burgundy before the final act. ‘What I hear is that your starving our guest to death. He could go at any moment, and you’re no closer to the truth.’

And neither are you, General, the Captain failed to say, sipping instead from his wine.

‘The way I hear it, you *want* our guest to die.’

Jötunson snapped back fiercely, never once moving from his reclining position. The hook nosed figure at the other end of the room watched him blank faced, perhaps enjoying the performance, perhaps admiring his composure.

‘Don’t be stupid, sir. I want our guest alive as much as you. But he’s a dangerous creature – we have to break him first,’ a delicate pause, a sip of wine, then: ‘if you think you can do better, you can come and relieve me of

duty.'

With a flourish, he hung up the telephone. Down in London, he knew, the General would be sitting, head in his hands, muttering 'What have I done?' When the MPs came to question him in – he checked his watch – ten minutes, they would get a full confession, and UNIT would be mobilised. He drained his glass, and looked to the dark figure at the end of the room. He started to clap, slowly.

Jötunson stood, and took his bow.

Sarfield Dales: September 6. 1998

21:03

'How much longer are you going to keep this up? There's still time for us to save you, if you'll be reasonable and answer our questions.'

Jötunson stood at the edge of the globe, looking in. The breathable glass distorted the Doctor's pale form, but not as much as it should have. He was in a bad way: his skin starting to peel away from his body, thin blood leaking out. His hair had completely gone now, save for a few thick yellow hairs starting to poke their way up all over his body. They were the same vivid yellow as the Doctor's eyes when he gave the Captain a tired look. Jötunson smiled back, the gesture hidden from the soldier sitting anxiously behind him.

'You can't keep it from us forever, Doctor,' Jötunson said, for the benefit of the Sergeant. 'We'll find your invasion force, and we'll defeat them. You might as well tell us.'

The Doctor closed his eyes, turned his head.

Jötunson leaned in: ‘Come on, Doctor. Cat got your tongue?’

And he gave Ace’s kitling a large wink, the creature’s face just poking out from behind the Doctor’s greying back. He wondered if Ace was watching.

Leaning in closer, so that the Private couldn’t hear, Jötunson whispered:

‘Doctor?’

The Time Lord’s yellow eyes flicked open, and he regarded the Captain suspiciously.

‘Thought any more on that riddle?’ he asked. ‘Got an answer for me?’

The Doctor was silent.

‘You’d better hurry. You can’t have much longer left.’

And leaning back, Jötunson let out a loud chuckle. Somewhere, an audience were applauding their hearts out. He resisted the urge to take a bow.

Sarfield Dales: September 6. 1998

21:24

Jötunson was back at his desk, flicking through the paper work. It didn’t bore him – nothing bored him, as such. He merely signed it with a flick of his wrist, tidied it into a neat pile, and set it to one side. Then he turned to his silent companion, locking his blue eyes onto his two black holes and smiled.

‘Something wrong, Munin?’ he asked.

His companion said nothing, merely standing watching him with two eyes that were all pupil, no whites. His hook nose cast a shadow over his mouth, leaving his face looking like it was built more out of shadow than flesh and bone. His shaven head reflected the light, accentuating the shadow. The dark coat he wrapped himself in completed the impression of some dark demon, carved out of night and waiting for a master to instruct him. The same dark demon that had captured the Doctor in the first place.

‘Come on,’ Jötunson said. ‘Out with it.’

And Munin spoke, a low, grave voice, husky from lack of practise.

‘How much longer do we stay here, Loki?’

Jötunson tutted, shook his head.

‘Not Loki, not here. Jötunson.’

Munin shrugged: ‘Loki, Jötun’s son, it’s all one to me. When do we go?’

‘We go when we go. Not a moment before.’

‘We’ve stayed here too long. Wasted too much time on distractions.’

‘I decide what’s important, or not. Understand?’

Munin shrugged, solemn. Jötunson motioned to the door by the desk.

‘Go on, get out. You can’t be here when she arrives.’

And without a word, Munin marched over to the door and pulled it open. It came easily on well-oiled hinges. Outside, there was a view of perfection: green rolling hills, blue crystal lakes, birds singing in the trees and the mid-afternoon sun beating down. Munin looked out of the office window,

and if he felt any surprise at seeing night fast taking hold outside, he didn't show it. Spreading his coat wide, two great wings unfolding, he took a hop and took to the air.

As Jötunson, Loki, closed the door, he took a moment to watch the great black raven flapping casually across the afternoon sky. He smiled, and closed the door. Night settled. Time Passed.

Sarfield Dales: September 6. 1998

22:15

'Move away from the door,' Ace growled.

Obligingly, Jötunson raised his hands, pausing only to flick the light on. He stepped away from the door, cautiously glaring at the seething mass of fur at his feet. The kitling had taken an instant dislike to him – he had no idea why – but it worried him. He got the feeling that at any moment, the little creature would snap and launch itself at his face. Even though he knew it wouldn't happen, it unnerved him. Despite that, he gave Ace a disarming grin.

'Decided against London, did you?' Jötunson asked casually.

'You too?' Ace asked.

He shrugged: 'You know how it is.'

Ace crouched on the edge of the desk, tensing to pounce. All that power, waiting to be unleashed. He was treading a delicate line.

'No,' she said, her eyes blazing yellow, 'but I'm starting to get the picture. Why don't you fill the rest of it in?'

'Where would you like me to start? I was born in a big house in the

country –'

Ace snarled, rocking slightly in her stance. The Captain got the message.

'What're you doing to the Doctor?'

Jötunson looked at her, for a moment letting the mask slip. Perhaps she saw the fatigue deep in his eyes, the endless sense of his place in the world, the tireless play-acting. Perhaps she didn't.

'You're asking the wrong questions,' he said softly. 'Don't you want to be there?'

'Where?' Ace asked, taken aback.

'When,' Jötunson corrected.

'When what?'

There was a knock on the door. With his eyes on Ace, Jötunson called a reply.

'You'd better come, sir,' the Sergeant called through the heavy wood.

'What is it?' he asked, ignoring a warning glance from Ace.

'It's the house guest, sir. He's dying.'

Jötunson directed a look at Ace. Her face went stone hard.

'Take me to him.'

Sarfield Dales: September 6. 1998

22:35

Jötunson stood back, letting the blood trickle down his face unheeded.

Shattered glass lay all over the floor, soldiers crowding round the only door in, all of them looking at the same spot. Sat not two feet from Jötunson feet was Ace, blood soaking into her clothes, a single tear falling down her face and she whispered silently. Resting on her lap was the Doctor's greying naked body. Jagged glass had ripped in to it, one long piece spearing his primary heart. His thin blood was pooled all around him, and his deep grey eyes were closed. He didn't breathe, and his hearts didn't beat. They had stopped not one minute since.

Looking down at the Doctor's dead body, and his companion clutching to it, hoping to force life back into it, Jötunson felt something tug at his heart. He checked the time. Half an hour and UNIT would be here. He had to make sure he wasn't. But still he didn't move, his eyes on Ace's back, the Doctor's face. It looked peaceful at last.

'It's all over, sir,' the Sergeant said at his elbow.

Jötunson shook his head slowly:

'No, not now,' he said. 'It's only just beginning, now.'

And they stood and listened to Wolsey howl.

SEVEN

Sarfield Dales: September 6. 1998

08:15

‘How do we get into your TARDIS?’ the Private asked, solemn.

The Doctor sat in his cage, cross-legged, trying to remember who he was, to block out all distractions. It grew harder every second. All he could hear were the insistent voices, forever questioning: why do you just sit; why am I doing this; where are your invasion forces; why won’t you fight. He could feel it slipping away from him, knew he didn’t have long left.

‘When does the invasion start?’

He opened his eyes, looked at the Private. He was young: blond haired and blue eyed, too young for the job he was doing. He had a nervous look about his mouth. As if he expected the Doctor to leap for his throat at any

second. So why disappoint him? Because there was a better way. Better than the taste of fresh blood in your mouth? Much better, much better. He hoped.

‘Where are your forces?’

‘What’s your name?’ croaked the Doctor.

The Private looked left, looked right, as if expecting his superiors to leap out and demote him for hearing this. The Doctor repeated himself, and the Private tried to meet his eyes. Tried, and failed.

‘Private Hicks. Tom.’

The Doctor nodded as if this was what he was expecting, as if his head was suddenly heavy.

‘Why are you doing this, Tom?’

Tom looked away.

‘I’m just following orders.’

The Doctor tried hard to keep his gaze, tried to bring that old timbre to his voice. To his ears, it sounded like someone doing a bad impression of him, him at his peak, when the Universe danced to his tune.

‘I’m going to die here. Is that what your orders tell you? To sit there and watch me while I die, to see me take my last breath and die?’

Tom paused, and the Doctor felt a surge of hope.

‘Are you here to watch me die?’ he asked, his voice sounding strong.

‘No,’ said Tom, firmly.

The Doctor nodded, breaking the gaze. He felt tired, so tired.

‘What can I do?’

‘I need water,’ he said, ‘maybe food.’

Hicks stood, sounding unsure:

‘I’ll see what I can do.’

And, perhaps feeling sheepish, perhaps for want of something better to do, the Private saluted. He waited for a second to see if the Doctor would return it, but he just felt too tired. Instead, the Private marched quickly out of the door.

The Doctor wouldn’t see him again.

Sarfield Dales: September 6. 1998

12:30

Time passed.

Sarfield Dales: September 6. 1998

19:58

The Doctor could feel his heartbeats starting to race. He tried to fight it, but the beast wouldn’t be silenced. He could feel the glass walls of his cage closing in on him, and knew that high above him the sun was starting to fade. He could smell the people outside the room, every one of them a living breathing bag of life that he could take and eat to revive him. All he needed to do was succumb and escape, ready for the hunt again. He let out a snarl, then

choked it back.

‘No,’ he said. ‘No, no, no.’

But it was no use, the beast was cornered, it wouldn’t be beaten, wouldn’t be held back. It was frightened: it could smell its own death heavy in the air. And he was afraid too, his own fear feeding the beast as his adrenaline started to pump. He could feel claws pushing their way out of his fingers, painfully tearing through the weakened flesh, his teeth growing in his mouth, cutting at the gums. He let out a cry of pain, but it turned into a bestial howl.

And then it came, the pain of the vision draining him immediately. He dropped to all fours, his head dangling limp, his entire body aflame. And then he opened his eyes.

He was out in the open, a grey giant towering in front of him, hear the rustling as the wind whipped through the trees, tore at his arms. The kitling was at his feet, ready to die for him, and he could see through his eyes too – the park brilliant in a yellow glow. He could smell everything on the wind: the road, the grass, the student houses behind him, the food cooking in their kitchens, rotting in their bins. It drove him wild as it tore through him.

He’d been such a fool.

‘Ace,’ his voice croaked.

‘Doctor,’ he felt her voice echo back.

And he knew what he had to do. He fought the beast down, slowed his heartbeats, flushed the adrenaline from his system. He felt his teeth shrink back to normal, leaving his gums bloody and tattered. He felt his claws retract,

leaving pinpoints of blood on the balls of each finger. He felt his eyes burning in his head, but try as he might, he couldn't turn them back. The vision faded, and he was alone again.

He'd been such a fool. Jötunson had told him Ace was dead, and he'd believed him. Jötunson, the same man who's trapped him here. The same man who's riddle he had to solve to escape. But now he had hope. Ace was alive, and she knew where he was. He knew she would come, knew she could save him. All he had to do was stay himself while she did. He had to focus on that, and nothing else.

He felt a slight heat behind him, and then the sudden appearance of fur, pressed against his back. He heard Wolsey purr in greeting. It gave him the strength to go on.

Sarfield Dales: September 6. 1998

21:03

'You can't keep it from us forever, Doctor,' Jötunson said, purely for the benefit of the Sergeant behind him. 'We'll find your invasion force, and we'll defeat them. You might as well tell us.'

The Doctor closed his eyes, turned his head. He had to remain focused. He could feel the beast gnawing at the edges of his defences, waiting for the perfect moment to strike.

'Come on, Doctor,' he heard Jötunson say. 'Cat got your tongue?'

He felt Wolsey stir behind him, but forced himself to focus. Despite the

fact he'd felt a thrill as he thought the kitling was preparing to strike.

'Doctor?'

He opened his eyes, glaring at Jötunson suspiciously. The Captain was leaning in, his back masking what he said from the guard behind him.

'Thought any more on that riddle?' he asked. 'Got an answer for me?'

The Doctor was silent, tried to focus. Ace was his way out now.

'You'd better hurry. You can't have much longer left.'

And leaning back, Jötunson let out a loud chuckle. Something in the Doctor flared, try as he might to control it. The beast leapt forward, and he let out a savage growl at Jötunson. The Captain stopped dead, looking shocked, then spun on his heel and marched out.

The Doctor settled back, contented. For the moment.

Sarfield Dales: September 6. 1998

22:01

'Where is your TARDIS?' asked the Sergeant.

The Doctor ignored him. He had problems of his own.

He couldn't have long left without water. As it was he was existing on the adrenaline that was flooding his system, and that had a price. He could feel the yellow fur pushing its way up through his skin - it was maddeningly itchy. The mental barriers he had put in place to keep the Cheetah virus at bay were crumbling. The beast was waiting at the edge of his mind, and it

never tired.

We should not be caged, it told him. We are hunter, we should run free, feel the wind on our faces, smell the blood of our prey. We should not sit here. We should attack.

He tried to think of Tom Hicks. He must have made some kind of complaint by now. For all he knew the troops could be waiting outside the door to free him. He knew they weren't - he could hear outside the door. All there was were the Captain, and his troops. But there was Ace – Wolsey had joined her now, so she must surely be nearby. And there was the riddle. If he could think of the answer - if Jötunson kept his word - he would go free.

He laughed at his own stupidity. There would be no escape that he didn't make himself, with his own claws and teeth.

No, he couldn't resort to mindless violence. He'd never escape that way.

That was the only way he'd escape.

The glass was too strong.

He could break it. He knew he could.

He had to think his way out. He wouldn't resort to violence, to bloodlust. If he did that, he'd already lost.

If he didn't, he was dead. And he wasn't going to die. He was a hunter - he died because his prey was just too strong, or because a scavenger fancied its luck. He didn't die lying on his side in a cage. He died because his teeth and claws weren't fast enough. He died with his enemies' blood in his mouth. And his enemies were all around him, waiting for him to fall. He was a beast, a

hunter, and he wouldn't let them prevail.

No. The Doctor gave a final burst of will, dredging up whatever reserves of strength he had left. But he had waited too long, been kept too long. He was weak, and the beast could sense it. It leapt forward, teeth flashing, claws tearing, and slashed its way through the Doctor's defences. He held up his arms, but its claws bit deep into his flesh. He let out a savage howl of pain, and anger.

At that moment, whatever had been the Doctor died.

Sarfield Dales: September 6. 1998

22:30

The creature that was the Doctor heard as the Sergeant bustled the Captain into the room, Ace quickly following at their heels, her eyes blazing yellow. Behind her, Wolsey ran to keep up as the group raced into the darkened cell room. It didn't take them long to see what was the problem.

The creature knew what it looked like, knew they expected to see the grey naked Doctor. Instead, there was now a fur covered creature with burning yellow eyes, razor sharp teeth and pencil thin claws. It threw itself at the glass with renewed vigour, hit with a sickening thud and bounced back to the floor of the cage. Then it picked itself up and did it again.

'Doctor,' Ace breathed, but the creature paid her no heed. It just threw itself back against the glass.

'I take it you didn't find the answer to the riddle?' the Captain said

casually.

The creature hissed at him. The Sergeant put a firm hand on his superior's arm, pulling him back.

'Sir . . .'

'It's alright, Sergeant. He can't break the glass. Look at him. He's half dead as it is.'

'Do you bleed?' the creature asked, stopping its relentless charge. 'If you bleed, I will escape this cage. I will do anything to see you bleed.'

'Yes,' whispered Jötunson. 'I think you would.'

Thud.

The creature began throwing itself at the glass. Ace gasped, stepping towards the cage. A group of soldiers appeared and pulled her back. As much as she struggled, she didn't break free. None of the soldiers were entirely convinced that was due to them. Thud. With a loud crack, the glass started to shatter.

'Oh,' said the Jötunson, moving closer as the Sergeant ducked back.

Then everything happened at once.

With a loud crack, the glass globe shattered, shards flying out everywhere. The creature could taste freedom at last. It saw the glass flying through the air through clouded eyes, and felt it bury itself deep into the creature's own flesh. There was a burst of pain as it felt its primary heart punctured, but also a fresh burst of life giving adrenaline set coursing. It moved like a blur, tensing in a second, then leaping. It was breathing heavy and ragged as it landed full in Jötunson arms, its claws biting deep. The

Captain barely even flinched beneath the weight.

‘Come on then,’ he whispered.

The creature drew its arm back in a second, and swiped. The razor claws bit deep, leaving three vivid red lines across the Captain’s face. He closed his eyes, breathed into the pain, but despite that said nothing. The creature was disappointed – it had wanted its prey to cry out in pain, pain for all the pain he had caused it. But nothing. It tried another swipe, but its weakened knees gave way and it collapsed on the floor, its life-blood pouring away.

In its body, it could feel microscopic creatures speeding around trying desperately to repair the damage done by disease, glass, starvation and dehydration. They struggled to stir the dying cells into renewed life, regenerating them afresh. The ravages of the last month had taken their toll, however, and the nanosubs died even as they tried to save him.

As it lay there slowly panting, the creature that had been the Doctor slowly died.

The fur fell from his body, leaving once again the Doctor lying there, punctured by glass, blood flowing away. For one last moment, he could feel his mind clear, his again. He looked up and saw Jötunson standing over him, three blood tears running down his cheeks. At last, he felt free. He wished he could thank the Captain for a moment, but instead with his last breath whispered.

‘I know why,’ he stopped, coughing up blood. ‘Because you could.’

Jötunson shook his head, his deep blue eyes suddenly aeons old.

‘No,’ he said softly, so the Doctor alone could hear. ‘Because I had to.’

And by the time Ace came to hold him in her arms, the Doctor was dead.

MILLENNIUM

Earth: *400,000,000 BCE*

Sunday

The Earth was, at the moment, a coiled spring, waiting. All seemed dead, a fine grey desert of sand and dust and ash, but all around were signs of life: a thick cloud of black smoke rose out of the hills in the background, contributing to the heady stench of sulphur in the air; the air crackled with fierce electrical energy, just waiting to be released; tiny pools of thick glutinous liquid bubbled quietly to themselves.

‘Primordial soup,’ the dark stranger said, dipping his hand into the pool, letting the viscous jelly coat his glove.

‘Marvellous,’ sparked his companion. ‘And now its all over your hand.’

The dark man looked up, a mischievous glint in his slate grey eyes. He

looked completely at home in his bizarre environment, despite his clean black clothes and neat Devil's beard. His calm neatness seemed to act as natural contrast to the pensive mood of the Earth, which was more than could be said for his companion. His light blue eyes were constantly darting across the dead landscape, the dust invading his cool brown clothes and light blond hair. The electricity in the air seemed to ground itself in him, infecting him with a nervous humour.

'Isn't it beautiful?' the calm stranger said, his arms encircling the blank vista.

'Beautiful,' his friend echoed, nervously. 'Are you sure we should be doing this?'

'Quite.'

'But what about the Academy?' he asked, looking over his shoulder as if naming the devil would make it appear. 'What about Bruiser? You know what he did to Drax.'

The bearded man laughed, short and clipped.

'Drax landed on a class five planet and declared himself a god. We were sent here to study the area. There is something of a difference, yes?'

'What about the law of non-intervention?'

The dark stranger stood, wiping his gloves on his long black robe. He gave his companion a solemn look.

'We're not intervening,' he said firmly. 'We're . . . mingling. Come on, let's see how it all turns out.'

'Hmm,' said his companion.

Lightning crackled as the two strangers paced off towards the hills, one following in the steady strides of the other. A fierce wind dragged the dry dust across the plains, and the pits bubbled happily to themselves. A fierce, elephantine howl filled the air, coming seemingly from everywhere at once. Within seconds, it died away and the planet was alone with its thoughts again.

Then came the explosion, and the spring began, slowly, to uncoil.

Earth: *65,000,000 BCE*

Monday

Three hundred million years passed without much of note occurring. The first life evolved on the planet, starting out as simple plant life, then growing until it had become the thick, lush woodland that covered most of the planet. Some plant life had considered forests simply not mobile enough for them and had developed into fishes, then toyed briefly with the idea of amphibian life, before settling into mammalian form. Besides that, things remained pretty much the same.

In the undergrowth, something rustled. The dense green leaves parted and something small and fur covered poked its nose out. It sniffed the air, cautiously. Then it cast a panic-stricken look back over its shoulder and scurried off.

‘Now even you have to be impressed by this, Alpha,’ said the dark stranger as he pushed his way through the forest.

‘I am impressed,’ answered his companion testily. ‘I’m just not sure the

Academy would approve. We *were* only meant to stay in the one time zone.'

The bearded man gave Alpha a cold, grey stare.

'There's more to life than the academy,' he said evenly.

'We've got to get a decent grade if we want to get anywhere in life,' he friend said firmly, as if reciting from rote. 'It's not enough just to be a Prydonian, you know.'

'If we want to get anywhere on Gallifrey,' his friend corrected.

'Where else is there?'

The dark stranger looked as if he was about to answer when something in the sky caught his eye. He shielded his eyes to try and get a better view. His friend looked up as well, but could only see a small black dot creeping slowly across the blue canvas. He looked to his friend and asked:

'What is it?'

The bearded man considered.

'It looks like a space freighter, circa twenty-sixth century Earth, I'd say.'

'What's it doing here?'

'Crashing,' the dark stranger said, grimly.

'Oh dear. Near here?' Alpha asked nervously.

'Fairly. Around Mexico, I'd say. Should kick up quite a dust cloud,' the grey eyed man ran a thick leaf idly through his hands. A thin trail of slime rubbed off onto one of the leaves. 'Not much of the greenery will survive that. Bad news for the indigenous life.'

'Yes, well that doesn't concern us, does it?' his friend said, coldly.

‘No,’ agreed the stranger. ‘The fire ball will kill us long before we get to starve.’

‘Oh,’ said Alpha.

The bearded stranger dropped the leaf he was holding and clapped his hands decisively.

‘Time we were off,’ he said.

‘Yes,’ Alpha agreed readily. ‘Back to the academy.’

The dark stranger shook his head, grinning in bemusement.

‘I really can’t see why you’re so devoted to that place.’

‘I’d like to see what you say in a thousand years when you’ve failed your finals,’ Alpha retorted.

The bearded man stopped dead, grinning an infectious grin. He nodded happily:

‘Alright then. A thousand years.’

‘Alright,’ Alpha agreed venomously. ‘Where?’

‘Somewhere we can get a decent cup of tea. Say, the eighteenth century?’

‘What, here?’

‘Why not?’

‘But . . .’ began Alpha

‘That’s settled then,’ the bearded man interrupted and strode off, leaving Alpha to scurry in his footsteps.

For the first time in over three hundred million years, a loud elephantine

roar filled the air. A few moments later, for the second time in just as long, there was an explosion.

France, Earth: 1792 CE

Tuesday

The tavern was badly lit, shadows creeping around the rafters, sometimes finding the courage to creep down and devour the men seated around the rough wooden tables. The air was thick with smoke from the pipes in many of the men's mouths, and filled with the pungent odour of burning tobacco. Women dressed in lacy tops and large skirts scurried from table to table, carrying trays piled with jugs of a dark, strong ale. A large fire burned angrily in its hearth, spitting, cracking and taking the January chill out of the air.

He sat in one of the tavern's upstairs rooms sipping tea from a china cup, dressed in the finest clothes the time could provide. Time had changed him, but not nearly as much as it should have. His face had thinned out, and his beard had long disappeared. His eyes, though, were still that same slate grey, and they watched the doorway without blinking. An outside observer would have put him down as a middle-aged business man waiting for a guest, perhaps an important client. He had been waiting a long time.

The door opened slowly, and a plump, middle-aged woman poked her head around it.

'Mr Smith? Your guest's here, sir.'

'Thank you, Mrs Briggs. Please show him in.'

‘Very good, sir.’

She began to disappear, withdrawing her head, when “Mr Smith” called her back.

‘Mrs Briggs? Happy new year.’

‘Thank you, sir. And the same to you. It can’t be any worse than the last one, can it now?’ she smiled kindly, and then added: ‘Still, who knows what the future holds, eh?’

‘I do,’ announced the tall guest who strode in through the door as if the room, and in fact the entire tavern, was his alone.

He took his three corner hat from his head and smoothed down his fine clothes. They were almost identical to Smith’s, the only addition being a ring on his forefinger with a large blue stone. He ran a hand across his dark brown beard, smoothing its neat hairs.

‘By the end of the year, the French peasants will have revolted, and Robespierre will be as dead as a doornail,’ he treated the plump landlady to one of his charming smiles.

‘Really, sir?’ she replied, and left the room.

The bearded traveller laughed a booming laugh and sat down in the comfortable chair facing his old Academy friend. Time had been kind to him, too: he had filled out into a proud, dark haired man, almost a mirror to his old friend. Mr Smith smiled at him.

‘I like the beard,’ he said.

‘I always admired it on you, “Mr Smith”.’

Smith shuffled in his seat, embarrassed.

‘Ah, yes. Well, I had to tell her something. I couldn’t very well tell her my real name.’

‘She’d never be able to pronounce it.’

‘Exactly,’ Smith paused and sipped at his tea. His guest followed suit. ‘I didn’t think you’d come.’

‘A deal’s a deal, although . . .’ he took the opportunity to pour himself a cup of tea, ‘although I already have my answer.’

‘Really?’

‘I don’t think we need to pretend, do you?’ he said bluntly. ‘We both know what business we’re in.’

‘Ah, no,’ Smith admitted.

Alpha picked up the sugar and slowly, deliberately stirred two spoons into his tea. He sipped again, then said:

‘I think in our line of work we do show a certain . . . loyalty to Gallifrey. Don’t you agree?’

‘I’m not so sure,’ Smith said quietly.

Alpha pricked up his ears.

‘I’m sorry?’ he said.

‘I’m not sure I am so loyal any more,’ Smith admitted.

Alpha looked surprise, practically dropping his tea.

‘But I’ve seen your record - you were commended on that Miniscope business.’

‘But that’s just it! All those years of teaching us that it’s impossible to change the time-lines, and now . . . but what do we change? Take this revolution that’s going to happen here. With just a few simple actions, we could change it. Thousands of people could be saved, but history would still take the same course. I’ve checked it with the Matrix. But will they let me?’

‘No, of course they won’t. We have our own power, and they’re too busy just trying to keep hold of it to bother with other planets. Why should we?’

‘To help all those people.’

‘They’re primitives!’

‘They’re still people.’

‘You’ve been spending too much time with that old hermit of yours. Believe me, we’ve got better things to worry about on Gallifrey than the fate of aliens.’

Smith stared at his guest for a few moments, and then pulled a pocket watch from his waistcoat. He glanced at the digital display, and then dropped it back into his pocket.

‘You’d better go.’

‘So soon?’

‘I have work to do,’ he said grimly.

‘Ah,’ Alpha said solemnly. ‘Another guest?’

‘A local,’ Smith said. ‘Goes by the name of Walker.’

Alpha raised an eyebrow:

‘Not like us to use a local,’ he said archly.

‘This one’s something special,’ Smith looked into the fire, the light dancing in his eyes. ‘He’s been working for me for the last hundred years, not aged a day yet. I’ve got a personal project for him.’

‘Then I’ll leave you to it,’ he said, rising.

‘Goodbye, Alpha,’ Smith said.

The bearded man smiled at the use of his old Academy nick-name, and answered using Smith’s real Time-Lord name.

‘Yes?’

‘Another thousand years?’

‘Why? I thought you had more important things to worry about on Gallifrey.’

‘Let’s say you’ve intrigued me,’ smiled Alpha.

Smith thought for a moment, before saying: ‘Yes, alright. Where?’

‘Twentieth century?’ Alpha suggested.

Smith nodded, and left, and time passed.

Shoreditch, Earth: 1963 CE

Wednesday

They sat, facing each other. This time, the table was empty of any drinks. This time, their clothes did not seem identical: Smith wore a dark suit hidden by a long, flowing cape, while his guest wore a light blue suit of the

finest quality, with a small bow tie around his neck. Time seemed to have caught them both up.

Smith's hair was now shock white and flowing down his neck, but his eyes were still grey. He looked at his guest with a friendly smile, but their was an air of pomposity around him. Alpha, however, was more greatly changed. He was a plump, balding man with a few missing teeth and a completely different face. There had been an accident, and he had been forced into his first regeneration. It didn't matter: Smith could still recognise him.

'Is it still Smith?' Alpha asked.

'I'm known as "The Doctor", nowadays.'

'Ah yes, I had heard. It seems you left in quite a hurry.'

'I had no choice,' the Doctor answered sadly.

Alpha looked down awkwardly at his blue ring. It glistened in the tavern's gas lighting.

'Yes,' he said. 'I heard about your family. I don't suppose you can stay long?'

'No. Susan is waiting in the ship.'

'You took your cousin?'

The old man's grey eyes flared fire, and he said firmly:

'Susan is my granddaughter, and always will be.'

The old students lapsed into an awkward silence. Alpha broke it first, eventually.

'Andromeda followed your example, you know. Do you remember her,

Thete?'

'Yes, a lovely young woman. She always seemed too bright to stay on Gallifrey.'

'She calls herself "Rani" now. It means Queen, apparently.'

'Hmm?'

'Yes.'

The silence reigned again. Eventually, the old man who called himself Doctor rose.

'Going already?'

'Yes. Goodbye, my boy.'

'Goodbye. 'Till next time? Same place?'

'Hmm? What?'

The Doctor wandered over to the door, but Alpha called him back, as he had before.

'Yes?'

'Here. Have this, you'll need it more than me.'

Alpha threw his ring into the Doctor's aged hand. The white-haired Time-Lord slipped it carefully onto his finger.

'Thank you,' he said, and left.

Alpha watched him go, thinking.

Shoreditch, Earth: 1963 CE

Thursday

The Doctor sat in the cafe, quietly sipping at his tea. It was cold and bitter, with no sugar. He didn't care - his mind was elsewhere. It had been a long time, exactly a thousand years, to be precise. A lot had changed, and not just with the old tavern. Over a thousand years floating through Time and Space. And now, nearly a whole day spent sitting in a cafe in London, when he had much more important things to do. Did he really expect him to arrive? After-all, they hadn't even fixed a date after last time. And he wasn't sure that he would come even if they had.

A shadow fell over the small, dark-haired Time-Lord. He looked up, and smiled.

'I didn't think you'd come,' he said to the figure in black.

'My dear Doctor,' the Master said, smiling, 'I wouldn't miss this for the universe. Would you like a drink?'

BEING A TRANSCRIPT

OF A TELEPHONE CONVERSATION

‘*As everyone knows, there is a station based in London whose job it is to monitor domestic telephone calls and report any suspicious conversations to the police. Being such an enormous task, the operatives use computers to scan every telephone call for certain “key words”: cannabis, murder, Downing Street, etc. However, what not everyone knows is that our old friends UNIT also use this station, listening for their own specific key words. It is one of the government’s biggest secrets as to why they employ a three man team to listen to housewives up and down the country discussing what “the doctor” gave them for their assorted aches and pains . . .*’

The Great British Secret

Benjamin Heyworth

And Ace remembered, remembered . . .

Transcript Follows:

Key Words – “The Doctor”; “Ace”

13:43

First Woman: ‘He’s gone. He was the best thing that ever happened to me. He was well wicked. He could do anything he wanted, made me feel like I could do anything I wanted, too. He showed me the universe, and he made the darkness go away. He was everything. Everybody loved him – well, everyone worth being loved by. And now he’s gone.’

Second Woman: ‘Poor love.’

First Woman: ‘He saved me, you know. More times than I saved him. Showed me where I was going wrong, showed me where I was going. He turned me around, all the way around.’

Second Woman: ‘And dragged you down.’

First Woman: ‘No. No.’

Second Woman: ‘If it wasn’t for him –’

First Woman: ‘If it wasn’t for him I wouldn’t have Wolsey.’

Second Woman: 'Wolsey! Of all the names.’

First Woman: ‘He’s part of me now. Maybe if I could do it again I wouldn’t want him so young, but I’d still want him. He’s the best thing about all of this.

You get that, don't you?'

Second Woman: 'I'm sorry. It's just . . . I worry. I can't help it.'

First Woman: 'I worry too. Enough for both of us.'

And Ace remembered golden yellow fur, tacky with blood, glass flying through the air. She remembered . . .

I want to say this right. I want to say this so that you understand it, and I don't want us to start shouting again. I couldn't handle it. Not now. I . . . I've been living with someone. Someone amazing. No-one you know. He . . . no, that's not good enough. We . . . oh God. He died. He's gone. And I'm alone. No, not alone, I'm . . . I've got Wolsey. You'd like him, really. But all he does it eat and play and I just can't any more. He's gone. He's left a hole inside me and he's gone, he's gone . . .

No, let me say this. Please, just let me say this.

They took the . . . I can't live where we lived any more. I can't get any of my things. Most of them were his things any way. They've given me a flat, but I can't live there. Not now. Too much happened to me. I can't go back. I don't know where I'm going too. I want you to have the flat – it'll be better than where you are now. You're in the same place, yeah? I've put the key in the post. I hope you like it. I . . .

No, there's something else.

And Ace remembered blood pooling on the floor, dark reflections dancing on its surface. She remembered wide mouthed faces, pale and . . . and . . . Ace remembered . . .

Transcript Follows:

13:41

First Woman: 'He had a . . . a disease. He fought it as long as he could. No-one was stronger than him. No-one. But he couldn't beat it. It killed him in the end.'

Second Woman: 'I'm sorry.'

First Woman: 'I've got the same disease.'

(There is 6.41 seconds silence on the line. Conversation continues.)

Second Woman: 'Have you got somewhere to go? You know you can always come here.'

And Ace remembered the Doctor, the beast that was the Doctor arching through the glass, sending it raining through the air, stinging her face, her arms. She remembered the beast as it snarled and tore its way to its prey.

She remembered that this had once been the Doctor, her Doctor, the oncoming storm, the bringer of darkness, trapped in his own shadow. And she remembered feeling the beast in her flex, yearning to be free.

"*Here's the key. I want you to have it. It's no good to me. I can't come back there. I'm sorry, but I can't. I need to know who I am first. But I'll keep in touch. Really. Love, Dorothy*"

Note in an envelope,

with a key to a flat.

Transcript Follows:

13:39

(Telephone rings. Is answered after 17.2 seconds.)

Second Woman: 'Hello?'

First Woman: 'Hello? Mum? It's me.'

Second Woman: 'Dorothy? Sorry, Ace.'

First Woman: 'That's okay. Dorothy's fine.'

Second Woman: 'Oh Dorry . . .'

(Second Woman cries for 14.6 seconds. Voice obscured by emotion.)

And Ace remembered.

Transcript Ends.

THE EVOLUTION MACHINE

ONE

Little Sarfield: 23. November, 2003

17:30

The house itself seemed as old as time, carved straight out of shadows rather than good honest bricks and mortar. It sat and brooded in its grounds, acres of trees and neatly trimmed grass, the occasional flower-bed breaking up the stark lines. The village lay miles down below it, protected by the valley walls, and the moon watched down from on high. The only thing even vaguely near it was the caretaker's cottage, and that sat down by the lane to the village, lit warmly from within, hidden behind the trees. The only thing that lit the house was the light of the pale moon above. It made it look sick and insubstantial.

The trees huddled close by it at either side – oaks, willows, large

bushes – yet none managed to bring themselves to touch the earth red bricks. Only a braver patch of ivy had managed to claim a hold, clinging desperately to the wall by the porch, fighting to urge to let go, to escape and never be troubled by the house's dark grasp again. Even the grass couldn't bring itself near to the house's feet, leaving a moat of bare earth running all round the roots.

Three chimneys broke the immaculate tiled roof, standing firm and proud, but no smoke issued from any of them. A multitude of close-grouped, arch-framed windows faced out, but no light burned from within them. The house looked dead, and empty.

But, perched on the watch tower rising out of the centre of the house, sat a single black raven. Its jet eyes rolled slowly over the grounds, taking in the ornamental water garden, the small family crypt, the oaks standing guard at the edge of the grounds, even the diffuse glow of the village down below, settling in for another long winter night. With barely a turn of the head, it took all of that in, impassive. Then, in a sudden burst of feathers, it threw wide its wings and let out a short croaking laugh, before soaring away into the night.

As if this was the signal it had been waiting for, the rain started.

Once the light faded, he found himself alone in the cellar.

He could feel cold stone beneath his skin. This wasn't something to worry about. He was naked, and colder than he should be, but this wasn't something to worry about either. It wasn't cold enough to kill him, so he could

live with it. He could see the brilliance of the light burnt onto his retinas, leaving the cellar a collection of vague red misshapes, but that wasn't something to worry about. His eyes would clear, given time, and grow accustomed to the gloom. He couldn't remember his name. That was something to worry about. A name was important, it was the most basic building block of a personality. Without his name, he had no idea who or what he was.

He tested his memory carefully. It wasn't all gone. He knew, for example, that he was in the cellar. He knew that if he climbed the stairs in the corner, he would find himself in the hallway. The hallway of what, he wasn't quite sure, but that would come later. He wondered vaguely if he would find the door at the top of the stairs locked, whether he was being deliberately kept prisoner. He felt his hearts quicken at the idea, and found himself looking around this way and that for a trace of a uniform, not even knowing why. When he saw he was alone, his hearts slowed. But the idea remained.

Perhaps he had fallen. The amnesia could be the result of concussion. He had been coming down to the cellar to . . . to . . . He couldn't think of any reason why he'd be exploring the cellar naked, but he supposed that might come. He checked his head gingerly for injuries. Nothing, except a fine head of dark, wiry hair. So it wasn't that. Still, the idea that he had hurt himself remained, strong enough for him to check his chest for scars. Nothing.

His eyes cleared, giving him a vague view of the cellar. Stairs in the corner – he realised now that he'd known they were there long before he could see them. Red brick walls either side of him, the last wall hidden in the

darkness. A single thick lead pipe running the length of the cellar, similarly disappearing once it reached the boundary of the light. Four windows, facing up into the night sky, covered in tiny rivers of rain water, water dripping down and away to who knew where.

He still couldn't remember his name.

Outside, the gentle falling rain patterned the thick glass of the windows, and filled the cellar with a gentle drumming sound. He listened to it, letting it calm him. His pulse slowed, his breathing practically stopped. His crystal green eyes flicked this way and that. Through the window he caught sight of a dark bird on the wing, flying across the face of the moon. It sent a shiver down his spine. From somewhere, his mind dug up the name of the bird: a raven. He tried to make it dig up his own name from a similar place, but it wouldn't. Or couldn't.

There was nothing else for it. He brought himself to his feet, ignoring the gritty feel of the stone beneath his feet. He made for the steps, not hesitating, not afraid. Now his eyes were cleared, he could see a small crack of light creeping in where the door didn't quite fill the frame. He had spent too long in the dark – it was time to go. Putting a hand on the single banister, he climbed steadily up the stairs.

The journey to discovery starts with a single step.

A single gold coin dropped through the air, reflecting the candle light before it clinked to the table top with its two twins.

‘Deal,’ Wagner said, his deep voice filling the small room.

The sound of the rain echoed around the station as it hammered into the flat roof above them. Somewhere in the corner, the water leaked through into a bucket: the station wasn’t built to last, and no-one could be bothered with keeping it repaired. It was little more than a shed out by the level crossing anyway – most of the people driving through on their way to the city assumed it was the guard’s hut. But it was the nerve centre of the Little Sarfield Constabulary, the one remaining officer of which was the grey haired guy dealing the cards at the other end of the table, a cigarette drooping from one side of his mouth.

‘You have to take this so serious, Steve?’ the Sarge said, fifteen cards shooting from his fingers faster than it took Wagner to take a chug on his beer.

‘We should consider ourselves fortunate he decided to bring this game over from Las Vegas for us, yes?’ Lars smiled, taking a sip of his neat vodka as he picked up his cards.

Wagner smiled, and inwardly regretted asking if they’d ever heard of poker over here when he’d first met the Sarge and Lars. They were good guys, and had taken him to their hearts over the last few months, but dear Lord they could rib a guy till he bled. He’d assumed it was the famous “British sense of humour” that he’d heard so much about, until he found out that Lars was from some place else, over on mainland Europe. Not that he ever said *that* out loud – the Sarge tended to get upset if you suggested that Britain was just some small island principality of Europe. He was just starting to learn the

boundaries of his new friends that way.

‘I’ll take two,’ he said, trying to keep his voice level. Three picture cards waved up at him, all of them hearts.

Lars nodded, and tossed down three cards without a word. His blond hair was swept neatly back out of his eyes, leaving his green eyes free to sparkle in the candle light. His face didn’t betray the slightest sign of what he held in his hand. As usual. The Sarge’s face too was set and firm, his eyes alive despite – or most likely because of – the years etched on to his face. Which meant that he had nothing and was planning to either burn or bluff. The Sarge, lord love him, always got a twitch in the corner of his eye when he had a good hand. He just couldn’t lie, which could’ve been why he was a cop. He’d never make it as a crook, anyway.

‘Well I’m having two,’ said the Sarge, as his eye started twitching.

Wagner threw Lars a quick grin, and the European threw down his cards. Wagner, however, kept hold of his and took another swig of his beer. A Bud. Not as good as you got at home, but still better than the sludge that passed for beer over here. He looked down at his cards. As well as the royalty smiling up at him, there was a nine and a ten of hearts smiling beside them. He settled in his seat, trying not to look too smug, or too rushed. Feed them the line, then reel them in.

‘You in or not, Steve?’ the Sarge asked.

‘You got a reason for trying to rush me, Sarge?’ Wagner asked back, his white teeth showing against his ebony skin.

‘Worried about getting back to your work, I’ll bet,’ Lars said.

To high-light his point, he waved a hand around the office. It was practically empty, the computer on the desk turned off and covered with a sheet, the three chairs dragged around the coffee table for the game. They never got put back, and no-one ever complained. The station was a relay point for the bigger one in the city: anything bigger than a kitten in a tree got dealt with up there. The Sarge was only here to work out his retirement, then they'd close the shack down. It was a common joke, and Wagner got the feeling that the Sarge was quite pleased his life had grown so quiet.

'When're they gonna replace you with a computer anyway?' Wagner said, throwing in three pound coins. Lars arched an eyebrow, but said nothing.

'As soon as they can find a computer that'll work for less than me,' he answered, chewing on the tip of his cigarette.

'No chance,' said Wagner. 'Computers got a better union.'

'You owe us a refund,' Lars said, picking an imaginary piece of fluff from his pastel blue suit. Man with a suit that good could afford to lose a bit of dough. 'We've got one of your computers at the Manor. We can't even make it turn on.'

'Not my department,' said Wagner. 'I only design them. They make them down in London.'

Casually placing his cards on the tabletop, the Sarge reached over to the telephone and picked it up.

'Who're you calling?' asked Wagner.

Putting his hand over the receiver, the Sarge said:

'Fawney Rig. I thought I'd better report that Lars had let something slip

about the place. Prob'ly a breach of the official secrets act, or something.'

'Ha ha,' said Lars.

'No, I think he's got a point. The law's there to be upheld.'

'Hello? Is that Fawney Rig? It's Sergeant Murphy here - I'm afraid I've got to report one of your staff. Yes, he actually mentioned something that goes on up there. Okay, right. Thank you.'

The Sarge put down the telephone and picked up his cards. With a single definite motion, he managed to throw in five pounds and stub his cigarette out in the ashtray at his elbow. Thunder rumbled in the distance, or . . . no, it was a train approaching. The six o'clock, bang on time. She'd be rattling the glasses on her way to the city in a couple of minutes.

'Well?' asked Wagner.

'They say I'm to shoot him immediately,' smiled the Sarge. 'Sorry, Lars. Nothing personal.'

'Only way you'll win tonight is if you *do* shoot me,' smiled Lars.

Outside, the rumble of the train got louder. Without a word, everyone reached down for their drinks. Even the Sarge's heavy coffee cup had to be steadied with a reassuring hand.

'I don't know how you put up with that,' Lars complained. 'You ought to get them to move you.'

'Nah,' smiled Wagner. 'If he does that, they'll remember he works for them and sack him.'

'You could be right,' agreed Lars.

That was when Wagner glanced over at the Sarge. He was sitting in his chair, his jaw almost on the floor, dark brown eyes staring straight ahead. His cards had fallen to the table: despite himself, Wagner noticed that he would have beaten him, again.

‘Sarge?’

‘Oh my God,’ said the Sarge.

Wagner wondered what was going on. The rumbling outside was even louder now - he thought for a brief moment that it must be an earthquake, until he remembered they didn’t have them in Britain. Then he turned around, and saw. For a moment, all three of them sat staring out of the window at where the village should have been. Instead of the familiar view, all they could see was the giant blue side of a British Rail train.

The Sarge was the first to move.

‘Something must be wrong,’ he said, pulling on his jacket and heading to the door.

‘Is there anything we can do?’ Wagner asked.

‘You’ve got a car, haven’t you?’ Wagner nodded. ‘Stay nearby, then. I might need you to fetch the doctor.’

‘Right,’ he said, but the Sarge had already gone.

Wagner and Lars looked at each other in silence and hurried after him.

The train had stopped just at the level-crossing, leaving the barriers down and the lights flashing wildly. It looked alright – no broken windows, no missing parts – but Wagner knew something was wrong. He’d been in the village three months now, and he knew damned well the trains didn’t stop

here. Sophie always complained that she felt cut off here – she couldn't drive the car and the buses were once a fortnight. So there must be some good reason for this one stopping now. He felt sure that nothing trivial would delay British Rail.

'What d'you mean no-one's hurt?' the Sarge was shouting up at the driver when Wagner and Lars arrived. He got there a good ten yards ahead of them: despite his age, the old coot must be in good shape. He was certainly a threatening enough presence to get the driver on edge. Perhaps it was the uniform, but more likely it was the fire in his eyes.

'Everyone's fine, officer,' the driver stammered, a little kid who didn't look old enough to be out of short pants. 'We're just letting off a passenger.'

Wagner reached the Sarge's side, and realised Lars wasn't with him. Looking over his shoulder, he could see his neat silhouette hanging back, assessing the situation from a distance. The Sarge didn't care, he was wading straight in.

'This isn't a passenger stop,' he snapped, disbelieving.

'Which is why it's so nice of them to let me off,' said a voice from beside them.

Wagner and the Sergeant spun around to see a woman hopping down from the carriage behind the engine, her long black leather coat flapping out behind her like a pair of wings. As she bent down to snatch up the blue denim rucksack at her feet, a dark shape leapt down behind her, landing sure-footed before it started to wind itself around the dark woman's feet. Her hair was pulled into a pony-tail, but her eyes were hidden behind a pair of mirrored

shades, despite the darkness of the evening. As the rain dropped all around them, the three men all struggled to find something to say.

‘Thank you,’ the dark woman said to the driver, his face beetroot red. ‘When do you come back this way?’

‘Not till Monday,’ the driver managed to stutter.

‘Right, I’ll see you then,’ she smiled. ‘Come on, Wolsey.’

Wagner knew cats – Sophie had had them for years, all of her life probably, so he’d been forced to live with them for the last five years. And he knew you couldn’t train a cat. But this one just trotted calmly behind the woman, pausing only to scowl at Lars. As the woman got closer, Wagner could see she had a badge pinned to her lapel: a hammer and sickle. It looked authentic. She smiled at Wagner, and he found himself trying to remember Sophie’s pale face.

‘I wonder if you could help me,’ she said, softly.

‘Glad to be of service, miss . . ?’ Wagner smiled hopefully.

‘Dorothea,’ she said. 'Dorothea McShane. Pleased to meet you.’

Wagner reached out his own hand and shook. The woman . . . Dorothea had a surprisingly firm grip for such a . . . young woman. Her own slender hand nearly crushed Wagner’s giant slabs of meat, which was no mean feat.

‘Stevie Wagner,’ he said, smiling all over his dumb face. ‘This is Sarge Murphy and Lars . . . hell, Lars. What is your last name?’

‘Something amazingly foreign and unpronounceable,’ smiled Lars, shaking the proffered hand. ‘Pleased to meet you.’

‘Likewise,’ smiled Dorothea politely. ‘This is Wolsey.’

The cat regarded them all with cold eyes, and Wagner felt worryingly as if he was being sized up for dinner.

‘Miss McShane?’ the Sarge said diplomatically.

‘Sergeant Murphy?’

‘You wanted to come to Little Sarfield?’ he sounded a little amazed.

‘I’m here, aren’t I?’

‘Well, yes, it’s just . . . well, forgive me if I sound a little confused, Miss McShane -’

Dorothea held up a hand: 'Dorothea, please.’

‘Dorothea,’ continued the Sarge seamlessly. ‘You’ll have to forgive me, but this is the first time that train’s stopped here in twenty years. So I’m sure you won’t mind if I ask you what brings you to the village.’

The young woman looked the Sarge up and down for a moment, her eyes hidden behind those mirrored lenses. Wagner wondered briefly what she was trying to hide.

‘I’m looking for a place called Fawney Rig. Heard of it?’

Wagner couldn’t be sure, but he thought he saw Lars go pale.

‘I’ve heard of it,’ said the Sarge, cautiously.

‘Is there anywhere around here I can get a taxi?’

‘I’m afraid not,’ Lars piped up. ‘The nearest taxi rank’s in the city. Ten miles that way.’

‘Ah, right.’

‘There’s a telephone at the station you can use to give them a ring, if you want,’ the Sarge offered.

‘Okay, yeah. Thanks.’

‘This way, then.’

Like some kind of butler, the Sarge stretched out an arm and Dorothea strode off towards the dull light of the station. Behind them, the lights of the village shone bright. Wagner moved to follow them, but Lars put a firm hand on his shoulder and whispered:

‘Who the hell is she?’

‘How should I know?’ Wagner grinned. ‘Perhaps she’s who they’ve sent to shoot you.’

Lars scowled.

‘Did you see that badge? D’you think she’s Russian?’

‘Jesus, I thought it was my lot that were supposed to be hung up on the Russians.’

‘But she could be?’

‘Dorothea’s French, isn’t it? Besides, there isn’t a Russia any more. Come on, Lars.’

Wagner moved off after the two dark figures, leaving Lars staring after them, barely even noticing the rain.

As soon as he left the cellar, the urge to explore came over him in a

wave.

The first room he found himself in was the kitchen. It looked as if it could have easily serviced an entire restaurant full of hungry people, the large black range sulking in the corner covered with a series of stains that gave testament to heavy usage. The floor was covered with dark ceramic tiles which were scrupulously clean, but chilled the bare soles of his feet. Although it was well stocked with utensils and appliances and food, it contained no clues as to his identity. Nor did it contain any clothes, so he left it without further exploration.

Deciding that, logically, the best place to find clean clothes would be in a bedroom, he headed upstairs. But even his journey to the staircase wasn't without excitement. Passing through the dining room, he found himself standing outside the library. Inside, there were shelf after shelf filled with perhaps millions of leather bound volumes. Just a quick look wouldn't hurt, he decided.

He wandered over to a leather topped reading desk and flicked on the small reading lamp that rested there. Sitting in the centre of the pool of weak light was a fresh looking red leather bound book. It was held shut by a heavy golden clasp, but luckily it wasn't a lock. In bold type, the first page read **500 YEAR DIARY**. Turning the page, he found a single entry made in a tight, mathematical looking handwriting.

Today, it read. *Wish I had more time to write a diary.*

The rest of the diary was empty.

Moving upstairs was just as confusing. The first room he found was

one of the bedrooms, complete with large four poster bed - fully made up - wardrobe, dressing table and teasmade. Flicking on a light - more to see if the electricity was working than because he needed it - he looked around. That was when he found the strange thing.

Lying on the bed, neatly pressed and in pristine condition, were his clothes.

They looked like they had been laid out by a butler, but he hadn't met anybody else on his travels. They also looked like they were his size, but he was sure they weren't his. They also suited his tastes - smart, yet practical. They were also obviously needed, and he was sure he wasn't the sort of person to let a mystery get between him and a decent tailor, so he pulled them on.

Then he noticed the full length mirror on the far wall, and realised he hadn't a clue what he looked like. Not just in the suit, but his face as well. He strode over, and examined himself.

Something about the whole outfit felt right. Whether it was the shirt and tie, or the tweed jacket he felt he couldn't be sure. The red waistcoat gave him a moment's discomfort – he felt sure it should be a little more . . . distinctive – but in the end, he decided that it would do. But no matter how it looked, it felt incomplete. Something was missing. Then he noticed the pale Panama hat resting on the corner of the mirror and put it on. Resting underneath that, an umbrella with a question mark handle. He held it in his hand and looked back in the mirror. At last, everything felt right.

Then he let his eyes leave the clothing, and brought them cautiously up

to the face.

He felt almost relieved when he saw it. Dark hair poking out over the ears, expressive eyebrows, thin laughter lines around the eyes. He realised he'd been anxious that he wouldn't recognise himself – because of the memory loss? No, that didn't seem right – but now he did, and that was fine. He realised he expected the eyes to be yellow – was that strange? – but they were a cool slate grey. Either way, the face failed to suggest a name to him.

Turning away from the mirror, he decided to continue his exploration.

Roaming around the top floor, he discovered two more bedrooms, an empty box room, and what looked rather like an office. It had a single tall window at one end, and sat in front of that was an old Edwardian writing desk with the most bizarre contraption sitting on top of it. It looked rather like somebody had tried to create a computer out of general assorted bric-a-brac, and they had succeeded quite well. It had all the distinguishing features, anyway: keyboard, monitor, disk drives. It even had what he assumed to be a modem, hooked up to an old fashioned stick telephone.

Sitting on its own table next to the desk was an ancient and ornate chess set, set up for the beginning of a game. He looked at it carefully, admiring the craftsmanship of the individual figure: he could almost recognise the one-eyed white king in the broad brimmed hat, and the individual feathers on his bishops - not the traditional horses, but here two white ravens - looked as if they were ready to ruffle in a breeze. It almost invited him to make the opening move, but instead he wandered away: he'd been struck by the feeling that chess wasn't really his game.

But that wasn't what really interested him. He was captivated by the bookshelves that ran all around the room, leaving little room for an easy chair, a standard lamp, a coat-stand and the chess set. Here were the books that had overflowed out of the library downstairs, the reference books that were used on a more regular basis: he ran a finger along their spines, reading. A dusty leather bound tome called **THE PAGINARUM FULVARUM**, with another beside it entitled **SÆMUND'S EDDA** and a whole series of similar titles, the last of which was called **HEMMING'S EDDA** Beside them was a large red book that had the words **ANCIENT LAW OF GALLIFREY** engraved on the front of it. He didn't like the way that felt in his hand, so he pushed it back onto the shelf.

There were enough books in this house to keep him in bedtime reading for the rest of his life. He briefly wondered whether they were his, or whether they and the house belonged to somebody else. He decided to cross that bridge when he came to it. For now, he still needed to find his name. Perhaps one of the books here would tell him, or remind him, or something. If he could find another diary, that should tell him, assuming that it was his, of course.

Sitting himself down at the table, he cleared himself a space and lit the candles he found there. As the small flames flickered and danced, he began to read.

'Raise five,' Wagner said. Nobody else spoke.

It had been Dorothea's idea. Just a quick game of stud before she went

on her way. Wagner didn't mind – he had plenty of time before he had to be back with Sophie – and neither had the Sarge. Lars, however, had made his excuses and left quickly. He'd been spooked ever since she'd asked about Fawney Rig – lord, she was probably just a tourist or something. Wasn't it some kind of old house or some such? Still, Lars had left, and now Wagner was sitting on a pair of fives. What the hell had he been thinking?

'Too rich for my blood,' the Sarge said, dropping his cards and picking up his cigarettes. The air filled with blue smoke as Dorothea casually regarded her cards.

'So,' the Sarge said, shaking out his match, 'Dorothea's French, right?'

'Only in name,' she smiled, her eyes still hidden behind those shades. If Wagner could see her eyes, he'd know if she was bluffing. 'I spent a lot of time in France, and I thought it sounded better than Dorothy.'

'Dorothy?' Wagner asked, playing for time. He needed to know if she had a decent hand, or if she'd drop.

'My mother had a Judy Garland fetish,' she answered, dropping seven pound coins onto the table. Damn.

At the start of the game, Wagner had thought he'd be able to bluff her out of the game – after all, she was on foreign turf, she wouldn't know the signs. Now he was hoping he could just raise the stakes until she could afford any more. Trouble was, every time he put in, she followed right behind, pulling out another few pounds from God knows how much in her jacket pockets. He'd already gone in to the tune of fifty pounds – any more and he wouldn't be able to take Sophie out this week, which would go down well. She had to

have something good – three of a kind or worse. And what made it all the more unbearable was that her cat was sitting right behind him, eyes on his back. It was starting to unnerve him. Only one way to go:

‘Raise three,’ he said, dropping a ten pound note onto the table.

‘So where do you come from?’ the Sarge asked, concentrating on his coffee cup.

‘Perivale, originally,’ she said, and all Wagner could see was his own reflection staring back at him.

The sergeant put his cup down, caught the woman’s eye. Wagner could feel the tension in the little room rise. He’d never seen Murphy having to deal with anything more threatening than a hose-pipe ban, but he suddenly realised why he was the only cop in the village. They didn’t need any others. But Dorothea met his gaze easily, brown eyes appearing from behind the mirrored lenses.

‘You be staying here long, Miss McShane?’

There was a moments silence, then Dorothea smiled disarmingly, turning back to the game. With a quick flick of the wrist, her eyes were covered again and a twenty pound note sat on the table.

‘I’m just passing through, sergeant. No trouble, promise,’ and to Wagner: 'Raise ten.’

It was no good. No-one bet like that without a good hand. No pauses, no twitches, no doubts. He could shovel a hundred pounds into the pot, she still wouldn’t sweat. Either that, or she was loaded, but he couldn’t afford to find out. He dropped his cards on the table, and motioned for Dorothea to take

the pot. She didn't move, and the Sarge started to chuckle.

'What?' Wagner asked.

'She's bluffing,' snorted the Sarge, as Dorothea's cards hit the table top. Nothing but ace high.

He stared at the cards for a moment, then started to laugh himself. He had been stitched up like a freshman. Behind him, he could hear her cat starting to purr softly. Dorothea smiled back at him, and he had to take a last pull on his beer to stop himself from saying something stupid.

'You not taking that?' the Sarge asked.

'I've got a better idea,' Dorothea answered, still smiling.

TWO

"*If caught in a no-win situation, remember to smile. If nothing else, this never fails to annoy your opposition.*"

UNIT Procedures Manual,

Broadsword Division.

Little Sarfield: 23. November 2003

18:04

The guard stood at his post, the first line of defence against the enemy.

His uniform was damp - as was he - but the holster at his hip kept his service revolver in pristine condition, ready. He wasn't sure what went on

inside the Manor - who was? - but he knew it was vital to national security. He knew it was something the enemy would love to get their hands on, or at the very least sabotage. It had to be important, otherwise he wouldn't be needed to guard it. The logic was inescapable.

It was thoughts like that that kept him going through the long, cold graveyard shift.

The guard post was in the ideal position, nearly at the crest of the hill on which the Manor was built. It offered a clear view of the only road up to the Manor, and also of the fields that lined the route up. Admittedly almost the entire left-hand side was masked by the woods - thick and dense greenery - but anybody trying to sneak up that way was in for a surprise. They'd soon find their way blocked by an eight foot high, barbed wire topped electric fence. No, the only way into Fawney Rig was through the gate, and the only way to the gate was through him.

If he had looked behind him, he would have seen the Georgian splendour of Fawney Rig rising up out of the grounds. It looked rather like a large brickwork box, lined with blank eyed windows and crawling with ivy. A long line of pale marble steps led up to a pair of hefty wooden doors, behind which sat another guard on a similar duty. But he didn't look behind him.

If he had looked to his right, he might have seen the village through the rain. He would have seen the scar of the railway line cutting the shortest route from Derby to the city. He would have seen the hundred tiny points of light that marked out the residential areas, or the dark cluster away from them that was the gothic structure everyone in the village called the house. But he didn't

look right.

If he had looked to his left, he might have seen the fence ripple under some force, or have seen the hint of movement in the dark green shadows. But he didn't look left. His eyes were on the pair of headlights making the journey up from the village.

The guard's hand slipped down to his holster, checking the revolver. He worked out that he had about a minute before the car got close enough for him to recognise it, if he could. A slim finger flipped off the safety catch. He knew the only person who could possibly be coming up to the Manor was the Listener, and he wasn't supposed to return until the morning. Unless he had discovered something important. Either way, it looked like it was going to be an interesting night.

The guard drew his revolver, and checked the rounds once again.

Wagner turned off the radio and tried to keep his eyes on the road. It wasn't easy. At first it had seemed like a fair deal: he'd give her a lift, he'd get to keep the money he'd lost to her. Now he found himself in the small car with nothing but her and the open road to look at, he was so sure. He'd quickly come up with a plan for staying out of trouble: it involved mostly ignoring his passenger, in particular the frighteningly pleasingly way her jacket fell open as she leant back in the seat, and especially how thin her T-shirt was. She was too busy watching the countryside roll by to notice. He hoped.

'Are you sure your cat will be okay?' he asked. She'd left it behind at

the station, and it had bolted off into the undergrowth after dinner no doubt. He didn't know how she expected to catch up with again. In his experience, cats rarely came when you called.

'Wolsey?' she said, her glasses reflecting the trees as the rolled by. 'He'll be fine. This sort of thing bores him.'

At least she had one mark against her then – she was one of those kooks who gave their pets human emotions. Like Sophie.

'Tell me about Fawney Rig,' she asked, seemingly casual.

He shrugged.

'It's just some government place up on the moors. Been there forever, longer than I have anyway,' he grinned, taking his eyes from the road for a moment. 'Name's meant to be some sort of joke. Don't get it myself. Must be a British thing.'

'I don't think so,' she said, smiling back. 'You've only just moved here, then?'

'Moved here couple of months back, with my wife,' he showed the band of gold on his finger. Dorothea nodded approvingly. 'They call me the outsider. Least, I hope that's *all* they call me.'

She laughed, a soft and gentle thing that he tried to make remind him of Sophie. It didn't, though.

'Reminds me of home. Where'd you move from?'

'Can't you tell? I'm from the good old US of A. Kansas.'

'You mean you moved from America to here?'

‘Well, this sure ain’t Kansas, Toto,’ he grinned. She looked at him quizzically: ‘You’re mother wasn’t the only one who liked the Wizard of Oz.’

‘Oh, right. I’ve never seen it. What brought you here, then?’

‘Work, at first. My company got a contract with your government, and they needed someone to liase,’ he noticed the bewildered look on her face, and definitely didn’t find it endearing. ‘We make computers - I design them. IE? Heard of us?’

‘Sorry,’ she said, shaking her head, ‘I’ve been out of touch for a while.’

‘Yeah, well we were bigger in the seventies,’ he conceded, throwing the car around a tight country lane. Dorothea barely even moved in her seat. ‘Anyway, that was how I met Sophie, and it was her who persuaded me to stay here.’

‘She sounds nice,’ Dorothea said kindly.

‘She is,’ Wagner replied. ‘She is.’

Wagner returned his concentration to the road, watching fields and bushes and trees a shoot by. You never really got roads like this in Kansas, not unless you really went out into the wilds, anyway. He remembered the first time he’d taken Sophie for a drive in the country - she’d been damn near petrified at the way he drove. He looked across at Dorothea - he couldn’t imagine her being scared by anything.

‘What about you?’ he asked. ‘What’s your story.’

‘Nothing exciting,’ she said, eyes on the road. She could probably make out the Manor by now. ‘Lived in London, went travelling, grew up, came home. Nothing special.’

‘Nothing special?’ Wagner laughed, loud and bass. ‘The only travelling I did when I was young was to high school and back again.’

‘Before you came here.’

‘Before I came here,’ he agreed. ‘Where did you go?’

She smiled again, as if he’d said something really funny then. He couldn’t help smiling back.

‘What?’ he said.

‘Nothing, it’s just it’s probably easier to tell you where I didn’t go.’

‘Okay, where didn’t you go?’

She lowered her shades, fixed him with those deep chestnut eyes of hers, flicked her hair out of her face and smiled.

‘Kansas,’ she deadpanned.

Wagner laughed so much he nearly had them both in a ditch. He didn’t know why - it wasn’t even that funny. Oh God, I’m sorry Sophie.

‘Damn,’ he swore.

Thinking of Sophie had reminded him - he’d missed his curfew. He glanced at his watch. He wouldn’t make it back until seven now. She’d be having kittens.

‘What’s up?’

‘I told Sophie I’d be back by six,’ he said.

‘I’m sorry. Blame it on me.’

Somehow, Wagner couldn’t see that one washing. Sorry I’m late, dear. I was driving around in the middle of nowhere with some beautiful young

woman I've never met before. What's for dinner?

'Yeah,' he said, 'I will.'

Although you couldn't call him relaxed, the guard was at least no longer as tense. As the car slowed for the gate, he paced over to the driver's side. He recognised the driver - hell, he'd recognised the number plate when the car was still two hundred yards away - but there was still the procedure to go through. After all, it could just be some cunning enemy trick.

The window wound down and the Listener glared at him.

'Open the gate,' he ordered.

'Your pass please, sir,' the guard said, unmoving.

The Listener reached into his pocket, and although he recognised him, the guard tensed. It was still possible he was reaching for a gun, if not very likely. He pulled out a pass and handed it to the guard. The photo matched the face, and the paperwork appeared to be in order. The guard handed it back.

'Thank you, sir.'

He hurried over to his guard post and began to open the gate. As the car slid through, it paused and the Listener leant out again, calling to the guard.

'Yes, sir?'

'There's a woman who's going to make it up here sometime, he said.

‘Find out what she wants and get rid of her.’

‘Yes, sir.’

And with that, Lars wound up his window and drove up to the Manor.

Half-way through his book, he stopped, one ear cocked to the ceiling. He’d thought he’d heard something.

He looked around for the source of the noise, but could see nothing. The candle on the desk had burnt down into nearly nothing, the hot wax pooling in the bottom of the holder. Every now and then, a fresh spurt of wax would drip down into the pool below. It wasn’t that. Over the other side of the room, the door swung back on its hinges in a slight breeze. It wasn’t that either. He couldn’t pin it down.

He tried to return to his book - a dusty volume about some children who found a universe of new worlds by walking into a wardrobe. There was something familiar about it - perhaps one of the names was his? For all he knew, he could have written it. For all he knew, the wardrobe in the bedroom could be the one from the story, and if he walked into it, he’d find himself in the land of Narnia.

It was no good - he couldn’t concentrate. He really did feel like he could hear something. He paused, cocking his head to one side and straining. He could hear the rain patting down outside, could hear his hearts beating, the grass growing. He couldn’t hear what was disturbing him, though.

With a sigh, he closed the book and went to try and discover the source

of his unease. Five minutes later, he found himself standing in front of the wardrobe, trying to think of a good reason why he should open the door. He couldn't think of one, but he pulled it open and stepped inside anyway. Somehow, he'd expected it to be bigger.

Feeling somewhat foolish, he stepped out again. He still didn't feel right.

It was then that he realised that was the problem. The noise that had disturbed him wasn't a noise at all: it was a thought, it was a feeling. Something had shifted imperceptively in the fabric of the universe, and he had felt it. And he knew it was up to him to do something about it. He just wondered what it could be.

There was only one thing to do, he realised. He had to find out what was wrong. All he had to do now was to find a suitable vantage point. If he could see enough of the world, perhaps he'd see what was wrong with it.

His eyes fell on the ladder that led up to the watch tower.

Perfect, he thought, and began to climb.

The guard tensed as the strange car pulled up to the gate. His hand dropped to the holster, flicking the safety catch off. This would be the woman.

The car pulled to a stop just in front of him and, before he had a chance to move, the passenger door opened. Out stepped the first problem, the woman. She was tall and slim, quite muscular but she didn't look like she would be much trouble. Her long coat flapped in the breeze as she bent down

to speak to the second problem - the driver: big black man. Looked like he could be trouble if he wanted to be.

‘Thanks for the lift, Steve,’ she said, her voice soft but firm. ‘You’d better get back home and scrape your wife off the ceiling.’

The black man smiled - white teeth unnervingly bright against dark skin.

‘You sure you’ll be alright?’ he asked.

‘I’ll be fine,’ she said. ‘Get home.’

‘Won’t you need a lift back? Somewhere to stay?’ he seemed unwilling to leave. Perhaps he did mean trouble, and all this was just a show for his benefit.

‘I’ve got somewhere to stay, and it’s nearby,’ she told him. The guard tensed on his gun. ‘Go on.’

‘Right,’ he said nervously.

As the car pulled away, the woman strode over to the guard’s hut. This was it, he thought. She was on her own now, her friend was steadily disappearing down the hill. He moved in front of the gate and tried to look immovable.

‘Good morning,’ she smiled.

‘You shouldn’t have told your friend to leave, Miss,’ the guard said evenly. ‘It’s a long walk back to the village.’

‘That’s alright,’ she replied cheerfully. ‘I’m not going back to the village.’

The guard wondered momentarily what was in the bag that was slung

over her shoulder.

‘Can I ask what you want, Miss?’

‘People to stop reminding me of my marital status,’ she snapped. The guard stared at her, impassively. ‘The name’s Dorothea, or McShane or at a pinch Ma’am.’

‘Can I ask what you want here, Miss?’ said the guard, deliberately. ‘This is private property.’

For a moment, the woman just glared at him. Even though he knew she wouldn’t be any trouble, the guard couldn’t help feeling just a little nervous. She looked down at her black Doc Martins as she said:

‘I was wondering if I could get in to see Michael Smith,’ she fixed him with a cold stare. ‘I understand he works here.’

‘I couldn’t comment, Miss.’

‘Well could you let me in so that I can find out?’

The guard put his hand deliberately on his revolver.

‘I’m afraid not, Miss. This is a government research centre. Only authorised personnel are allowed past this gate.’

She looked stumped, obviously realising there was no way for her to complete whatever mission she was here on. She’d run away home, faced with such stern opposition, and Michael Smith . . . well, the Listener would be interested in him. Conspiring with the enemy, no less.

He realised with a jolt that the woman was talking again.

‘Is there any way I can get the proper clearance?’ she was saying. The

guard shook his head. ‘Well in that case . . .’

With a start, the guard realised she was reaching into her bag. It took him a whole second to flick open the holster, and another one to draw and aim the revolver. The woman didn’t even look worried as she fixed him with that stare again, looking down the length of the barrel..

‘Are you going to use that, Private?’ she asked calmly.

‘Not unless you give me reason to, Miss.’

‘That’s Ma’am,’ she said, and pulled a small black book out of her bag.

He kept the revolver trained on her as he took the pass. He was already experiencing a sinking feeling when he saw the insignia engraved on the front in cool blue ink. A globe with wings. UNIT. He flipped open the pass, and a photograph of the woman glared up at him. McShane, Dorothea, no rank, born 20-08-70. The pass was issued on 23-11-95 by a Brigadier W. Bambera. Worst of all, she had BROADSWORD clearance. The guard saw his career flashing before his eyes: it was very short.

‘Is that authorisation good enough for you?’ she asked calmly.

The guard holstered his revolver, automatically flicking on the safety catch, and handed back the pass.

‘I’ll have to check with my superiors, Ma’am,’ he said, meekly.

Dorothea smiled charmingly, slipping her pass back into the denim bag.

‘You do that, Private.’

The guard saluted, and skulked over to the telephone. Things hadn’t exactly gone as he’d intended. Now the Listener could deal with the problem.

Lars stood by his desk, his tie lose around his neck. His eyes were wide as he looked around the room. He couldn't believe what he was seeing.

On the desk, the telephone rang. Automatically, he picked it up.

'Hello?' he answered weakly.

'Sorry to bother you, sir,' said a voice - the over zealous guard on the gate. He was still there, then. 'It's that woman you wanted me to tell you about. She's here.'

'What does she want?'

'Erm . . . she wants to talk to a Michael Smith. Do you know who that is, sir?'

He did. He was an Opener: not a particularly important job, but then it was the Listener's job to know everybody. Nice enough chap, slightly Aryan, with a broad Yorkshire accent. He struggled not to bark a laugh down the telephone. It was probably shock.

'I don't think that's going to be possible, Private,' he said.

'Yes, but, well sir,' Lars couldn't remember a time when he'd heard the guard less sure of himself - usually all he needed was a gun to boost his confidence. 'There's a problem, sir.'

'You could say that,' Lars said quietly.

'This woman, sir,' the guard continued. 'She's UNIT, sir.'

Oh God, not now. The last thing he needed on top of all this was UNIT

poking their noses around. What had Smith got him into?

‘Get rid of her, Private,’ he said firmly.

‘But, sir,’ the guard protested, ‘she’s got clearance. She’s Broadsword.’

‘I don’t care if she’s got the Queen with her,’ snapped Lars. ‘I don’t want her in here. Do you understand?’

He didn’t wait for a reply before he slammed the telephone down. This was not part of the plan. There was no way that UNIT should get involved, and certainly not the Broadswords. He wondered briefly whether Smith was involved in something else, something other than Vali. It was unlikely. This whole thing was getting very, very badly out of hand. In fact, he thought as he scanned the room, that could well be a huge understatement.

The room just looked back at him with a dozen dead eyes, blood soaking the floor.

The guard put down the phone and smiled. At least now he had his orders, and whatever happened, he couldn’t go wrong if he followed them. He unholstered his gun again, flicking off the safety catch.

‘Well?’ the Broadsword asked.

He tried not to smile as he told her the news. It was, after all, only a job. It wasn’t his fault that he liked it so much.

‘I’ve spoken to my superior, Ma’am,’ he said evenly.

‘Good,’ she said, heading for the gate. ‘Let’s get this thing open.’

He wished he could have seen the look in her eyes when she heard the revolver cock, but those sunglasses she wore stopped that. He liked to think he would have seen fear there, or at least surprise.

‘I’m afraid I can’t do that, Ma’am. My orders are to keep intruders out of the grounds,’ he grinned, ‘by any means at my disposal.’

‘But my clearance . . .’

‘Doesn’t change those orders,’ he interrupted. ‘If you have a problem with that you can let your superiors sort it out with my commanding officer. Until then, you are not getting through that gate.’

She looked him up and down then, a hunter. He felt she was checking for any weakness at all that she could use to her advantage. He glared at her, the revolver unwavering, and tried to look invincible. She smiled, a truly disarming smile, and said:

‘Okay. Bye, Private.’

He tried not to sigh with relief as she turned and walked down the hill. Instead, he spoke with what he hoped was a resolute and threatening tone.

‘Goodnight, Ma’am.’

She didn’t turn as she walked, a fact for which the guard was truly grateful.

In the watch tower, he looked across the village, searching.

He saw the lights of a small cottage at the entrance to the grounds, and

he saw the trees that walled the house swaying. He saw another old house - though not as old as his - sitting at the top of a nearby hill. He saw the lights of the village spread out far and wide and, further on the horizon, the brighter lights of the city. He didn't see anything that could account for his unease.

He didn't stop looking, though, because he had realised what he thought he had first heard. It had sounded like a group of people screaming out in agony, and then falling silent.

THREE

Little Sarfield: 23. November, 2003

18:47

Wagner tried to drive, navigate, think about his wife, listen to the radio, and definitely not think about Dorothea at all, all at the same time. He wasn't having much success.

It didn't help that the road was so damned dark, or that the road was so slick. On either side of him overgrown trees reached out with their ghoulish branches to try and trap him. Had the British never heard of hedge trimmers for God's sake? Another turn like that one, with a low hanging branch just trying to crack his windshield, and he'd be road kill. It also didn't help that he hadn't a clue how he'd explain his lateness, or even why he'd decided he couldn't just tell the truth.

With a tut, he reached over to the glove box and popped the catch. Resting inside was a map of Derbyshire, a box of tissues, a couple of tapes (Sophie's, he noticed. He must have borrowed them at some point) and a crumpled packet of Marlboros. With expert fingers, he teased one out of the box and slid it into his mouth. He pushed the lighter and waited for it to pop out again.

Goddamn Brits couldn't even make a decent cigarette - he'd never get used to the bizarre colour they printed on their filters. What was wrong with good old fashioned white? Seemed they only used that over here for menthols, of all things.

The lighter popped out again, and he pushed the hot end against the tip of his cigarette. Damned thing tasted like a low tar. They couldn't even put a decent amount of tobacco in over here.

. . . They're not dumb, they were so wrong, sang the radio. *She's not always fun . . .*

At last, he thought. A decent song.

Of course, he was supposed to be giving up. As far as Sophie was concerned, he had done: five years ago. She'd been adamant, telling him she didn't want to watch him die of lung cancer, so he'd thrown away the pack in his pocket. The next day he'd gone out and hid one in his car. The same pack that was still there now. The only time he really smoked now was when he went to the station for their weekly game of poker.

He wondered whether Dorothea smoked, and felt guilty because of it. She probably didn't.

That was when all hell broke loose.

The first Wagner knew about it was when the car decided to swerve suddenly over to the left, the handling like driving through treacle. The word “blow-out” skipped through his mind, but he was two busy to acknowledge it. He fought to keep the car on the road, thick arms straining, but the trees were leaping out all around him. He had only a few seconds to pray that he’d be alive to make it back to Sophie before the car dove nose first into the truck of a tree.

He jerked forward as the car stopped, his forehead tapping the steering wheel lightly, his safety-belt straining to hold him back. He saw the windshield shatter, the tiny shards of glass flying all around him. One of them cut a thin line across his cheek on its journey - an inch to the left and he would have lost an eye. His cigarette was snatched out of his mouth and landed in his lap. The wind was knocked out of his lungs, and the branch of the tree poked him in the face.

It was then that he realised he was still alive, and he breathed in a lungful of precious air. It never tasted so good. Then he noticed the burning sensation in his crotch.

‘Jesus Christ!’ he screamed as he snatched at the fallen cigarette.

He soon found it.

It’s true, he thought as he took an experimental drag, smoking is bad for your health. The cigarette tasted disturbingly of burnt cloth, so he tossed it aside. Then he thought about petrol. He had just crashed, so it was highly likely that the gas tank had ruptured, and if that was the case . . .

Wagner didn't think he'd moved as fast in his whole life as he did trying to undo the safety belt. It came off easily enough, but he had a moment of panic when he found the door too bent to open. Only one thing for it, he thought, and began to climb out of the front of the car, carefully avoiding broken glass and damaged tree. He was surprised by how little he hurt - he'd expected at least a broken bone or two. Perhaps he had a charmed life.

The first thing he did when he climbed off the bonnet was to stamp out the cigarette that was lying innocently on the grass. The next thing he did was to laugh long and hard with the joy of simply being alive. He soon stopped that, though. If he was going to be rescued, he didn't want to be caught laughing like a loon.

He decided it might be a good idea to examine the car; make sure he wasn't going to blow himself sky high, whilst getting a head start on the insurance forms. It didn't take long to set his mind to rest on that score - the only part of the car to be damaged was the front where it had nose-dived into the tree, and the wheel of course. It had been a blow out, he could tell. In fact, most of the tyre had practically disintegrated.

Looking closer, he caught the glint of metal inside the rubber. A nail? He took a closer look, pulling the offending article out and holding it up to the dull light of the moon. No, it wasn't a nail. It looked more like a dart. It looked like . . . like somebody had deliberately tried to make him crash.

Wagner looked around him, suddenly aware of how exposed he was. Perhaps Sophie had been really upset when he hadn't turned up, and had hired a hit man. He decided it might be a good idea to get out of the open and

into some shelter. But where could he go? It took half an hour to get to the village by car - how long would that be walking? There was always Dorothea, of course. She had said that she had somewhere to stay around here, and it was an emergency. Sophie couldn't blame him for that, surely. After all, he needed to get out of the rain.

He wondered how in the hell he was going to explain this to her.

If he'd have known that he only had five more seconds of consciousness, he probably would have chosen to think something else. After that, he had no more time to think anything, because it all happened so fast. He heard the slurping crack of a dead twig breaking behind him and swung round like a startled rabbit. Three seconds left. Then he saw the massive shape advancing towards him.

'Who are you?' he said.

One second. He got an impression of great strength in a slender frame, and burning red eyes, before the figure lifted its arm and slapped him across the face. It would have been funny, if it hadn't snapped his neck round so fast that his head cracked into the side of his car. There was a flash of bright whiteness as his head struck the car, and then everything went fuzzy and grey. He was vaguely aware of the figure leaning in, and then of being lifted, before he sunk into oblivion.

He didn't even get the chance to consider himself lucky because he wouldn't have to think up an excuse for his lateness. In fact, he'd never need another excuse, ever again.

Dorothea trotted casually down the hillside, her mind hard at work on the problem, her boots leaving muddy imprints in her wake. It was really quite simple: that pass should be able to get her into Fort Knox if she deemed it necessary, but it hadn't got her into Fawney Rig. Either there had been a simple cock up, or that place had a strict no-go policy (which would make it unique amongst the government installations she'd investigated) or they were doing something in there they didn't want UNIT to know about.

Not that it mattered which ever it was, the course of action was the same. If they were deliberately keeping her out, or if they were that hush hush that no-one could get in, then she'd just have to find her own way in. If it was a cock up, well she couldn't really report it to her superiors, otherwise they might start asking awkward questions about what she was doing trying to use her pass when she was officially meant to be on leave. So she'd still have to find her own way in. Of course, it would be easier to wait for Michael to come out and talk to him then, but if her research was accurate then that would be a very long wait: the staff lived and worked up at the manor, and they never got the opportunity to head down to the village.

So she was decided. Of course, if she was going to do it by the book, she ought to head back now under cover of darkness and attempt her covert intrusion. To be honest, she couldn't bring herself to try tonight. She could try to dress it up with some pretty excuses – like the fact that if they suspected her, they'd be waiting up now for her to try something - but to be honest, she just wanted a bath and a couple of hours kip. She could continue her career

as a cat burglar after a good night's sleep and a bowl of muesli. Besides, she thought checking the small part of her that belonged to her sibling, Wolsey was off somewhere with a rabbit, and wouldn't want to be disturbed until he'd slept it off.

So she had decided, and once she'd done that, it didn't take her long to reach the house. Standing there in the dark, trees rising up either side of her, the light drizzle just slowing enough to stop being called rain, watching the gravel track wind its way past the caretaker's cottage and up through the woods to the house: it was enough to make Dorothea she was a teenager again, standing there for the first time, the Doctor at her side. And what a night that turned out to be.

Of course there'd been a different caretaker back then, not that she could blame her for resigning when she did. But the cottage hadn't stayed empty for long, and it meant there was always someone there to have a chat with when she came visiting. She was debating popping in the see him now in his disorganised little cottage when she happened to glance up at the house. Her heart skipped a beat.

It was still the same old creepy place, pale walls showing up the blank dark windows and the ancient architecture casting shadows in the oddest of places, but this time something was different. Looking up into the Doctor's study, Dorothea could see the pale flickering light of a candle.

She was heading off down the path before she even realised it.

She hadn't seen him in ages, she thought as she walked down the gravel driveway. The last time had been in'95 - God it was good to be able to

use decent tenses again, something he'd never been particularly good at. He'd been there to see her sworn in at UNIT. She even suspected that he might have put in a good word for her - although whether that worked for or against her she wasn't sure. She remembered he hadn't wanted to meet Bambera, saying it would only cause complications. She'd had some fancy explaining to do after the whole Aylesbury Incident, but it was easier once Bambera had met the Doctor. She believed anything now, if she said he was involved.

She reached the door on the right hand side and knocked three times, listening to the sharp rap of the knocker echoing through the house. Then she stood back and waited. After a few moments, the door swung open and there he stood. He hadn't changed one bit, but then he never seemed to as far as she was concerned. He looked down at her with those piercing grey eyes of his and said:

'Yes?'

Hardly the greeting she'd been expecting.

'It's me,' she said. 'Dorothea?'

He looked blankly at her. Something wasn't right here.

'Ace?' she tried again, and saw something spark in his eyes.

'Ace?' he echoed, looking at her face again.

'Doctor,' she said, 'are you alright?'

And then it was there, plastered all over his face. That huge grin that seemed to distort his whole face with the sheer size of it. His grey eyes danced again, and he seemed himself again.

‘Doctor!’ he said, ecstatic. ‘That’s what it is!’

Dorothea suddenly got the feeling it was going to be a very long night.

Somehow, they had naturally gravitated towards the kitchen. It brought back memories, walking down the hallway and entering that grubby room. Memories of mugs of tea and discussions about the nature of the universe, or pasta and sympathy. It still managed to retain some of the life they’d poured into it back then, even though it must have been empty for nearly three years.

He pulled off his jacket and dropped it casually over the back of a chair.

‘Tea?’ he asked.

She nodded. All she needed now was a bath, a kip and some answers. She sat herself down at the table, expecting none of them.

‘Has something happened?’ she asked.

‘I don’t know,’ he said quietly. ‘I can’t remember.’

He found some matches on a shelf and lit the gas under the kettle. As he scanned the room, searching for the teapot, Dorothea had a moment of realisation.

‘You don’t know me, do you?’

He smiled at her, warmly.

‘Hello,’ he said, flicking her nose with a finger. ‘I’m the Doctor, and this is my friend, Ace.’

Dorothea smiled back – how long had it been since she’d heard that

said?

‘Milk?’ he asked.

‘Please,’ she said, and when she saw the lost look on his face she added: ‘Try the fridge.’

He wandered over to the huge white refrigerator and opened the door. Sitting on the middle shelf was a single bottle of semi-skimmed. Aside from that, the fridge was empty. It didn’t occur to her to find that odd, and it was out of her mind as soon as he poured a drop into her cup. He didn’t take any.

‘I’m not Ace any more, Doctor,’ she said, as diplomatically as she could. He looked surprised. ‘I’m Dorothea.’

‘Dorothea,’ he said, rolling his Rs, tasting the sound of it in his mouth.

She nodded.

‘How long?’

‘Since I left you? Ten years?’

‘Ah yes, Ace, but how long for me?’

‘Don’t you know?’

‘I can’t remember,’ he said. ‘I woke up in the cellar about an hour ago. Before that . . .’

The kettle began to whistle. He whipped it from the stove and poured its contents into the teapot before the steam had touched the ceiling. He dropped the kettle back onto the stove and stood staring into the pot, watching the tea brew. Dorothea wondered what he could see there.

‘I think it’s all still there, Ace,’ he said softly. ‘I remember you and I

remember . . . no, it's too vague. But with time, I think it will come. But there's something wrong, Ace. I can feel it. And I don't think we have much time.'

Dorothea moved to his side, poured out the tea, handed him his cup. He took it with a smile, looked into her eyes with his own deep grey pools.

'We'll sort them out, the three of us,' she smiled. 'Hello, I'm Ace, and this is my friend the Professor.'

He took a long gulp of his tea. Somehow, he managed to give the impression that he was smiling all the time he drank. That was impossible, of course.

'Perhaps we should go down to the caretaker's cottage,' Dorothea suggested, sipping at her own tea. 'Maybe Chile knows something we don't.'

The Doctor fixed her with a stare, dropping his tea back onto the counter.

'Chile?' he asked urgently.

'Yeah. The caretaker.'

'Ace, I think I've just remembered something else,' he said darkly. 'I don't trust Chile, do I?'

Dorothea gave him a strange look.

'Trust him? You gave him the job.'

Sophie Wagner looked at the telephone, half willing herself to pick it up, half willing it to ring.

She tried to stop herself from worrying - after all, he'd be spending the night at the police station, and there really couldn't be a safer place than that, could there? But he was late, and not just a couple of minutes. It was getting on for an hour now, and he was usually home at six on the dot - either grinning widely and planning a night of costly romance, or else looking shamefaced and searching for comfort. It was usually the latter - he wasn't exactly a card sharp, despite what he told her.

The telephone didn't ring, and Sophie didn't pick it up.

Perhaps something had come up, and Sergeant Murphy had needed some help. It would be just like Stevie to offer to help. He was always doing odd jobs for the neighbours, just because they asked nicely. That was one of the things that had first attracted her to him - that and his broad frame. She liked her men to have their fair share of muscle - it was almost as if she were trying to make up for her own slight frame if they ever had children. It would be just like him to get caught up doing a favour for somebody and forget to ring home. No it wouldn't, not Stevie. He'd ring home if he had to stop to tie his shoelace.

Sophie tried to click her nails on the glass surface of the coffee table, but couldn't: they were bitten to the quick. It drove Stevie up the wall - he was always telling her to stop it: sometimes he offered to bite them for her. Half of the time she didn't even know she was doing it. The noise of the telephone not ringing was beginning to drive her crazy.

A car drove by outside and her heart skipped a beat. It had to be him - who else would be driving by here? She was just getting ready to speed over

and scream something obscene at him when he came through the door, when she realised the car wasn't stopping. It wasn't him.

This was stupid. There was only one thing to do - she'd ring the station and find out what was going on. He was probably still there, playing cards, losing money. God help him if he was.

'Hello,' she said quickly as the phone was answered, 'Sergeant Murphy? It's Sophie Wagner here.'

She heard the sergeant mumble on the other end, then say:

'Ah, Sophie, good to hear from you. Thought I might actually have a 999 to deal with. If that husband of yours has told you it was me who won all of his money, then I'm afraid he's lying.'

'Er, actually that's why I'm calling,' time to spit it out, she thought. 'Stevie hasn't made it home yet, and I was wondering if he was still there for some reason?'

Murphy paused, leaning back in his chair. Now wasn't that interesting. Old Steve hasn't made it home yet, after giving our young stranger a lift out into the middle of nowhere. Now one of them was going to be in big trouble.

'No, I'm afraid he's not, Sophie,' he said, as diplomatically as he could, 'but I shouldn't worry. We had a visitor up at the station tonight, from out of town. They needed to get up to the Manor, and Steve kindly offered to give her a lift. He's probably on his way back right now.'

'Oh, right, thank you,' said Sophie. Poor girl was probably going out of her mind down there. 'I was just getting worried, that's all. Silly, really.'

'Not at all,' he assured her in his most comforting voice. 'And if he

doesn't turn up soon, you feel free to give me another call and I'll see what I can do to find him. Okay?'

'Yes, okay, thanks,' she said. 'I'm sorry to bother you.'

'No bother at all,' he told her. 'After all, that's what they pay me for. You make sure you give that husband of yours a good ear-bashing when he gets home, okay?'

'Oh don't worry, I intend to,' she laughed.

'Good. Well, I'll see you soon then, Sophie.'

'Yes, okay. Bye.'

'Bye now,' he said and hung up.

He sat at his desk for a few seconds longer, shuffling the deck of cards, a distant look on his face. Then he came to a decision and reached over to the telephone again. Digging a battered note book from his pocket, he looked up the number and dialled it with a pencil. It was answered after a couple of rings.

'Hello, Tony?' he said. 'Yeah, it's Murphy here. Listen, Perivale's in your area isn't it? I was wondering if you could do a records check for me. You got a pen? Okay, it's a Dorothy McShane, probably about twenty-seven, twenty-eight, uses the alias Dorothea. Yeah, well you just ring me back when you've found something, yeah? No hurry. Okay, bye.'

Well, he thought, it never hurt to find out a little about a new poker hand in town, did it?

The guard stood at his gate, ready for anything. He had dealt with the UNIT spy; he could deal with anything the night chose to throw at him. It was almost getting pleasant now the rain had stopped. The clouds were still there, of course, but at least that meant for a warm night, and it wouldn't be long until he was off duty anyway. His relief was due any moment.

Above him, the moon struggled to shine through the dark clouds. To his right, the village slept. To his left, the woods shifted, ominously. Behind him, he heard an engine started.

He turned just in time to see the car drawing up to the gate, so he managed to get the gate open before the Listener had to tap his horn. As the car slid out of the grounds, the guard waved cheerfully. The Listener didn't acknowledge it, the car rolling on past to the crest of the hill. Then it stopped, the red lights two burning eyes in the darkness. The reverse lights came on and the car crept back towards him. Close enough for the Listener to wind down his window and shout over at the guard.

'Private?'

'Yes, sir?'

'I'm going down to the village again. If anything should . . .' the Listener paused. Whether he was thinking, or whether it was just for effect, the guard didn't know. 'If anything should happen, call me immediately at the police station.'

'Yes, sir,' he knew he meant the UNIT woman. So, he was expecting her to return. Well, he could handle it: it was what he was trained for.

‘Don’t, I repeat, *don’t* get yourself killed. Do you understand?’

The guard saluted.

‘No, sir.’

The Listener ducked his head back into the car and drove off, away down the hill towards the village. It was comforting to know that his superiors were so concerned about his welfare. Perhaps a promotion was in the pipelines. But there was no time for idle thoughts like that: he had a job to do. Highly trained, and deadly accurate, the guard returned his attention to his duty: guarding the Manor.

Beside him, the bushes rustled again.

‘Stay behind me, Ace,’ the Doctor said, pressing the door bell. ‘There’s something strange going on here.’

The door swung slowly open, and there stood a tall coffee skinned man, dressed as if ready for bed. He took one look at the Doctor, and Dorothea behind, and smiled a warm smile. His teeth were a bright shining white in the darkness.

‘Doctor! What a pleasant surprise,’ he said.

‘Walker,’ said the Doctor, sternly.

A cloud passed over Chile’s eyes – Dorothea could see it. A shadow of something, unseen, unspoken. Then he shook his head slowly, looked solemn.

‘No,’ he said. ‘Not for a long time. Now I’m Chile Littlemore. Just Chile, little more.’

For a moment, Dorothea thought that the Doctor was going to push it, but instead the little man merely nodded.

‘You’d better come in,’ Chile said. ‘There’s someone waiting for you, Dorothea.’

There was something strangely comforting about walking into Chile’s home that Dorothea couldn’t quite put her finger on. Perhaps it was the gentle fragrance of flowers that hung around the place, even in winter when there were no blooms in evidence. It was almost magical, as if he could summon their aroma whenever he wanted through the black arts alone.

Perhaps it was just the thought that - despite the inconstant nature of the world outside - nothing ever really changed in the caretaker’s cottage. Perhaps the junk scattered around the place got slightly higher year by year, but generally the whole pattern remained. There was still the same Victorian table in the corner - buried under the same pile of paperwork - with the same three dining room chairs sitting around it: the fourth of the set missing presumed firewood. And there was the same battered sofa she had sat on the last time she came calling.

‘Cocoa?’ Chile asked politely.

‘No, thank you,’ the Doctor said softly.

‘Yes please,’ Dorothea answered, adding: ‘Who wants me, then?’

‘He’s on the sofa,’ Chile called from the kitchen.

Dorothea looked more carefully, and saw him. She went to sit next to

him, dropping first her bag and then herself onto the sofa. She was slightly annoyed that Wolsey was already here, sleeping quietly in a ball. Sometimes, she thought the kitling was getting too cleaver for his own good. The Doctor made himself comfortable on one of the dining chairs, dropping his coat over the back of it, his hat in his hands. He was looking around like a child in a toyshop, admiring every piece of Chile's extensive antique collection.

'You're quite a collector,' he said.

'I just have an eye for a bargain,' Chile said as he walked through into the front room, a tray in his hands. He handed Dorothea a cup of steaming cocoa and set a plate of biscuits down beside her. Taking his own drink, he pointed at a pair of book-ends on a shelf. 'Take them, for example. Got them last weekend for a couple of quid. They'll be worth twice that next year.'

'I didn't think you did it for the money,' Dorothea said, sipping her drink. It tasted like liquid gold.

'Oh I don't,' he said, clearing a space for himself at the table. 'I like being surrounded by beautiful things, is all. But it's nice to know other people think they're worth hideous amounts of money.'

'I can imagine,' she agreed, smiling. It came as quite a surprise to all if them when she yawned. 'I'm sorry,' she apologised, 'I've been travelling since yesterday. Didn't get a chance to sleep.'

'Quite alright,' Chile said with a magnanimous wave of his hand.

'It's just so relaxing here,' she continued, 'what with the cocoa, the flowers and everything.'

'The flowers?' Jacob looked confused.

‘Can’t you smell it?’ she asked, afraid it might just be her.

‘Begonias,’ the Doctor suggested.

‘Oh,’ Chile said, ‘that! That’s the air freshener I use - I can lend you a can, if you like.’

Dorothea decided that it would be a good idea to drink her cocoa and keep her mouth shut. So the setting was different, but aside from that Dorothea was finding things incredibly familiar.

‘You don’t know what’s going on, do you?’ Chile asked.

‘I can’t remember. I woke up this evening. Before that . . .’ he let the sentence hang in the air. ‘Something’s wrong, isn’t it.’

As far as Dorothea was concerned, something was wrong. Just when things were starting to get interesting, she was falling asleep. Her eyelids were heavy, and her head kept nodding in a most embarrassing fashion. She decided to put her cocoa down before she spilt it all over herself, and tried to follow the conversation.

‘And the last I remember of you, you were called Walker.’

‘Amnesia?’ suggested Chile. Dorothea’s head dropped again, then jerked back up.

‘I don’t think so,’ the Doctor said, shaking his head.

‘The last time you were called Walker,’ Dorothea said, determined to stay awake, determined to be part of the conversation, ‘was just after the Doctor came back.’

‘Came back?’ asked the Doctor. ‘From where?’

There was a pause, and Dorothea let her eyes close, just to rest them.

‘You died, Doctor.’

Dorothea’s head dropped again, her chin tapping her chest, and this time it didn’t rise again. Her eyelids glued together, and her mind began to drift towards the Dreaming. As she feel asleep she heard the Doctor and Chile talking to each other, their voices fading away as if they were travelling far away from her.

‘The Cheetah Virus,’ she heard the Doctor say. ‘Tell me everything.’

And then Dorothea was asleep, curled up next to Wolsey, snug and safe.

FOUR

Little Sarfield: 23. November, 2003

19:56

The guard watched the road and surrounding fields for any sign of the UNIT woman returning. He had his orders now - he knew what needed to be done. And he was perfectly willing to do it. Stop the woman from getting into the base, then call the Listener at the police station. He had been entrusted with the safety of the Manor, and he wanted to justify that trust. He knew he could do it.

Over to his left, the woods shifted again.

Perhaps, if he proved himself to the Listener, this could be his route to the promotion he desired: after all, he didn't want to be on guard duty for the rest of his career. All he had to do was demonstrate he could be relied upon,

prove he had initiative and skill, and those sergeant stripes would be his. He turned his attention back to the roads and the fields. Nothing. Well, just let her try, he'd be ready.

In the woods, a branch snapped.

The guard spun around. So, she was using the trees as cover to get in, was she. Well, she'd be in for a surprise: if the electric fence didn't get her, he would. He drew his revolver, the barrel glinting in the gloom. He checked the chamber - full. He flicked off the safety catch and headed into the heart of the woods.

It took a precious few seconds for his eyes to become accustomed to the green gloom, seconds in which she could have attacked him if she was truly worth her salt. She didn't, and soon he could make out the individual shapes of the trees and see anything, if it was moving. He looked. He couldn't see any movement. If she'd seen him she might be hiding, waiting for him to give up. He wasn't going to. If she was here, he was going to find her.

In the bushes, it stood immovable. The weight over its shoulder was nothing, and it shifted it slowly so that it couldn't obscure its vision, but so that the creature could not see the movement. The whole woods stood out for it in glorious infra-red detail, thin red greenery snaking up around it, and wide red leaves masking it from the creature. It waited, watching for the creature's next move.

It was obvious to him now that she had seen him enter, otherwise he would have expected to see her moving towards the fence by now. So she was planning something. Well, let her try - he reckoned he could out fight her if it came to it.

He scanned the immediate area, looking for some trace of her. Nothing, just dark trees and greenery. He weighed up his options. He could wait for her to make her move, or he could flush her out. If he waited, she'd have the advantage. So he had to force her to make a move.

He looked around again, failing to spot the dull glint of metal in amongst the shrubbery. Checking his gun again, adrenaline flooding his system, he began to move ever so slowly forward.

God, he thought, this was what it was all about.

It watched him move through the redness. It took only 1.1 seconds for the following information to be computed and assimilated, and a course of action decided upon.

TARGET: HUMAN, MALE. HEIGHT 1M 72, WEIGHT 342.64KG, CHRONOLOGICAL AGE 25.2 ORBITS. TARGET **ARMED**. WEAPON ANALYSIS BEGINNING. ANALYSIS COMPLETE: WEAPON PRIMITIVE COMBUSTION FIRED PROJECTILE WEAPON. NO APPARENT DANGER. SUITABILITY OF HUMAN TARGET: ANALYSIS BEGINNING.

The human obviously had no augmented vision: as the male creature scanned the surrounding trees, it failed to see its bulk hidden behind a cover of thin leaves. Even the simplest night vision enhancement should have been able to detect its form behind such flimsy cover, even without the tell-tale heat trace that it gave off. He was obviously part of a primitive species.

ANALYSIS COMPLETE - SUITABILITY OF HUMAN TARGET: NIL. TARGET DESIGNATED **HOSTILE**. WEAPONS SYSTEMS ON-LINE - SYSTEM RUNNING AT OPTIMAL. SEEK AND DESTROY.

Its course of action decided, it began to move.

The first the guard knew about was when he heard the sound behind him. He spun around just in time to catch a glimpse of the giant rushing towards him with impossible speed. It was carrying over one shoulder what appeared to be a body. He had just enough time to register that the giant had burst from a section he had thought empty before it grabbed him with a hand and lifted him off the ground. He found himself staring into a grim death's head, two slit eyes burning red into his.

'Who are you?' he managed to blurt out.

With a silent *snick*, a concealed blade in the giant's forearm extracted, pushing through a flap in its wrist. The blade extended out to its full gleaming length, almost as long as the giant's entire forearm. At least half of its length buried itself in the guards neck. He let out a bubbling gasp as he suddenly

found it impossible to speak.

The giant pulled the blade out of the guard's throat and then pushed it viciously into his stomach. He felt its sharp edge intruding into his gut, and tried to scream as the giant jerked it up almost to the wound in his neck. No sound came, though, save for a forced bubbling. Apparently satisfied, the giant tossed the dying guard aside with a single impatient gesture. He landed in a heap on the floor, after crashing through two thin-trunked trees.

As the creature carried on its way towards the Manor, the guard's last thought was how chillingly impassive the giant's skull-like face had remained throughout. Then he died.

DOCUMENT ONE

. . . but perhaps the most interesting aspect of the *Mysterious Lady of Paris* (188?) is that all the questions that the observer asks about the painting - who is this woman, where does she come from, et cetera - were the very same questions that were being asked by the artist as he worked.

The history of our *Mysterious Lady* is one that can only be pieced together using historical documents, the diary the artist periodically kept and - most importantly of all - intelligent guess work. Even this picture is more of a sketch, and an incomplete one at that. All we really know for sure is that our lady was called either Dorothee or Dorothea - records indicate the latter, whilst the artist uses the former, perhaps an indication of friendship? - and was a foreign traveller from an unknown country who was engaged - briefly - to one Count Constantin Sorin of St. Petersburg. If she used a last name,

posterity has not recorded it.

It appears that our Dorothee arrived in Paris in the spring of 1887 at around the same time as another traveller - the Count of St. Petersburg. It seems that the two - perhaps drawn together by similar lifestyles - soon fell madly in love. The engagement was announced a mere month after their first meeting. As a celebration of this engagement, the Count evidently decided to commission a portrait of his betrothed and approached Duvall to this end. The artist - never being one to rush into his work, as we have discovered - proceeded to arrange four sketching sessions with Dorothee which occurred one a week for the next month.

We are quite lucky with regards this period of Dorothee's history as it coincides with another period of activity in the artist's infrequent diary entries. The first sketching session remains a mystery - perhaps little happened of note, or perhaps - more likely - our artist was too drunk to remember what occurred. With the second session, very little of note appears to have happened, as can be seen by the diary entry I have translated:

'*Met with Constantin's fiancée for sketching. Still annoyingly cheerful about wedding plans. Finish early.'*

In the penultimate session, again little of import seems to have occurred, yet it is important to note that Duvall did see fit to comment that Dorothee appeared less "*annoying cheerful*" about her impending nuptials. This could perhaps be put down to last minute nerves, of course.

What happened between this third session and the final meeting is a matter of legend amongst art historians.

There is a story - whose validity cannot, of course, be confirmed - that the close of this session saw the beginning of another of Duvall's infamous drinking sessions. What seems quite extraordinary about this particular session is that - quite in contradiction to the conventions of the day - the artist was joined by an aristocratic lady, not the usual painted lady. It is widely assumed that this lady was Sorin's fiancée, Dorothee, and although there is no confirmation of this anywhere it is certain that something occurred between the final two sessions to form a bond between painter and model.

The next stage of the tale can be told by Duvall himself, from his diary entry of that day.

'*Sketched Dorothea for the last time today. It was all I could do to make the dear creature smile, such was her sadness. It was fortunate I was only finishing a study of her hands.*

Once the sketching was finished, I felt I must ask her what her trouble was. As I feared, it was Constantin. He is a dear friend, but all to dry to take this girl for life. I fail to see what she does in him, which is, I suppose, fortunate.

It seems poor Dorothea is sickening for her homeland. My suggestion that she and Constantin visit it after the wedding was not taken particularly well. It seems she too is wondering what it was she saw in my friend. When I ask, all she can really tell me is that he reminds her of an old love. But they are engaged now, and it seems as if there is little she can do.'

This conversation that took place between them would certainly seem to explain the alternate title the *Mysterious Lady of Paris* sometimes goes by:

The Mirror of Love Lost.

Unfortunately, this is the least well documented period of Dorothee's history - the next entry in Duvall's diary is from 1891, by which time the painting is finished and Dorothee is long gone, and forgotten in a haze of opiates.

We do know that in the autumn of 1887, Count Sorin threw a party to celebrate the forthcoming wedding, so it is evident that the two were still engaged at that point. Most of the Parisian elite were invited to and in attendance at that party, including our Duvall. There is a story that circulates about that party that I offer here only as one possible version of events.

It seems that Dorothee indeed attended that party, and was again appearing not exactly enamoured with her up coming wedding. It is said that Duvall himself tried to cheer her up, to no avail, and by the end of the night he caught her in the garden with another traveller. This stranger - reported as being a professional of some description: perhaps a lawyer or a physician - had an amazingly beneficial effect on Ms. Dorothee, lifting her spirits to the point of hugs, tears and laughter.

When Sorin came to claim his fiancée from this stranger, young Dorothee is said to have called off the wedding there and then with apologies. It is said she left that night with the stranger, leaving Sorin heart-broken and humiliated.

This is not the only explanation for what we no to be true: there is another story that suggests Dorothee died that night, which would explain her disappearance but not the lack of documentary evidence. Another story - most

probably started by Duvall himself - suggests that it was Sorin who broke off the engagement when he learned of his betrothed's night of passion with the artist. I myself discount this story because it does not seem - to me, admittedly - that such a headstrong girl as Dorothee would fall for somebody of Duvall's nature.

All we know for sure is that the engagement between Sorin and the mysterious Dorothee never blossomed into marriage. Before Sorin returned to his native Russia, he visited England and took a wife there, a young girl by the name of Mary Wilson, and the Sorin line continued until it was severed in the 1940s, the name and title lost due to adoption outside of Russia. Obviously, he never asked for the painting to be completed and paid no monies to Duvall. He was given one of the series of sketches to keep as a memento - what has happened to it since is anybody's guess. The other nine sketches survive to this day in the Louvre.

It appears that sometime between the autumn of 1887 and the next diary entry in 1891 - presumably earlier - Duvall uncharacteristically completed the painting in return for no fee, and kept it up until his death in 1901. From there, the painting was sold to . . .

An extract from

The Paintings of Windsor (Cambridge University Press, 1972)

by Prof. Rachel Jensen

FIVE

‘*In conclusion, I find that* Project Vali *has been a costly and dangerous mistake. Indeed, if our society survives its consequences, we will find ourselves called to account for it to a much higher authority*.’

From a destroyed memo to the

Prime Minister of Great Britain, 2003

Little Sarfield: 24. November, 2003

06:30

Dorothea was woken from dark dreams by a gentle patting on the back of her head. She didn’t even need to open her eyes to know it was Wolsey, probably with some fresh kill to share. All these years together, and he still hadn’t seemed to work out that she didn’t need him to feed her. A nut cutlet and a mushroom risotto did just fine for her.

‘Good morning,’ Chile called, before she’d even had a chance to sit up. ‘I’ve got toast and juice waiting for you. There’s marmite, or guava jelly if you want it.’

She sat up on the sofa, pulling away the blanket someone had put over her and noticing that they’d also taken her coat off. Wolsey jumped away and finished his meal in the corner, as his sibling did her best to ignore it. Looking around the room, she noticed that the Doctor’s hat and coat were gone.

‘Where’s he gone?’

‘Down to the village. He has a lot of things to think about.’

Pulling herself to her feet, Dorothea padded into the kitchen. She saw Chile bent over the kitchen table, scraping the burnt bits off his toast. There was a pot of tea brewing in the corner – some bizarre herbal mix that only Chile knew the recipe to. It tasted like a autumn sunset, although after the whole flowers thing last night, she wouldn’t be surprised if it came from a packet. The threads of her dreams still clung to her, refusing to be shaken loose.

‘What’s going on, Chile?’

Chile put the toast down, resting both hands on the pine table. It was only when he fixed her with a soft gaze that she realised her sunglasses had been taken off her last night, too. It didn’t matter: she had nothing to hide from Chile, or the Doctor.

‘How much did he tell you? How much did you hear?’

Ace thought back:

‘Not much. But I had the dream again last night.’

She could feel the dream waiting to burst up within her again – she'd had it so often now she didn't know whether she remembered it, or just the first time. Trapped in the darkness of the cellar, Loki beside her – not the shaven-headed fake Captain, but Loki as they knew him later – and the Doctor just a beast in a cage. And as glass shatters all around her, she sees the Doctor lying, dying on the floor. And she feels herself change, the beast take her, as she launches herself at Loki. He just laughs, and laughs, and laughs.

'Dorothea?' she heard Chile coming in over the airwaves, and found that he'd manoeuvred her into one of the antique chairs.

'What happened?' she asked. Wolsey was rubbing around her legs again, concern coming off him in waves.

'You went,' the caretaker said softly.

Dorothea simply nodded. Of course she had. Chile pushed a steaming cup into her hands. It was sweat, warm, tasted of better days. His pale coffee hand was warm on her arm, his brown eyes reflecting her own. Wolsey didn't even react: there were only two people he let touch his Sibling, and both had been in the room the previous night.

'He came back,' Chile said softly. 'He came back for both of us.'

'I know,' Dorothea said, suddenly feeling like Ace again.

Chile frowned. He could read her mind at times.

'What?' he purred.

'I . . .' she stopped. No. This had to come out right. 'I'm so glad he came back. It was the worst year of my life, thinking he was gone. Worst, and

the best. I learnt a lot about myself, Chile. I learnt my limitations, what I could and couldn't do any more, I learnt to live with – I love Wolsey to death, but I had to learn to live with him, right?'

'And you had to live with what killed our mutual friend.'

'And then he comes back. Right as rain, the old –' she caught herself in time, seeing Chile's face tense slightly,'– the old him –'

'A new him.'

'It was the happiest night of my life, Chile, that night in Sydney. But it's hard to see him beat it, and to know that I'm going to live with it for the rest of my life.'

'Did he ever tell you how he beat it?'

'No. You?'

Chile shook his head.

'But I know this much. If he could've, he would've shown me.'

Chile stood, heading for the door. He stopped half way, and Dorothea had to twist to see that he'd picked up the Doctor's question mark umbrella. He'd be getting wet, wherever he was. Resting underneath it in a neat pile, were Dorothea's jacket and shades. Three guesses who'd put her to bed last night.

'It's possible,' Chile said, 'that he still might.'

'No.'

'You can see it as much as me. He's back. His travels took him from this plane, when Loki –'

‘Killed him.’

‘But this is him back. When he’s finished here, he’ll go back to Sydney and he’ll find you again. Who’s to say he won’t cure you now?’

‘Look at him, Chile. You’ve spoke to him. He hasn’t got a clue how it happened. ‘Sides, I’m used to it now. Be like giving up an arm.’

She reached down, stroked Wolsey behind the ears. The kitling purred softly, then crawled away to rest by the radiator. Dorothea stood, pulling on her jacket, slipping her shades over her eyes. Chile looked concerned, standing between her and the doorway, but stood aside as she smiled. Poor Chile. He could never refuse her anything.

‘I’ve got to go.’

‘Looking after him again?’

‘He can look after himself. I’ve got work to do.’

‘UNIT?’ Chile asked, eyebrow raised.

‘I’m on leave. Personal project.’

Chile nodded, opened the door for her.

‘Anyone I know?’

‘Fawney Rig.’

Chile’s face hardened. For a moment, he looked like the old Chile, the Walker, but it passed in an instant. But as Dorothea tried to step passed, she found his hand on her arm, holding her back. She raised an eyebrow at him.

‘I’ll come with you,’ he said, a flat statement. She knew he’d brook no argument.

‘Okay,’ she said. ‘I could do with a diversion. Over-active sentry.’

‘Been a while since I had to deal with one of them.’

Dorothea smiled:

‘Don’t worry. It’s like riding a bike.’

And they set off into the morning mist.

Sergeant Murphy sat in his office and watched the sun come up over the village. It was as sight he never failed to miss, unless circumstance or exhaustion made it impossible. There was a certain kind of light he had only ever seen in the village at dawn, and nothing else could compare.

The sun was just cresting the other side of the valley now, spreading its warm orange light over the - mostly - sleeping village. The rough brick houses soaked up the light and the warmth gratefully, feeding it to their occupants until they were energetic enough to venture out into the light themselves. The train tracks glinted pleasingly outside of his office, two lines of fire running from horizon to hill-lined horizon. There would be no train today, he knew, and that only increased the feeling that the metal lines had only been put there to enhance his enjoyment of the morning sun. God had truly known what he was doing when he sorted out the sunrises, he thought playfully.

It was a hard job being the village’s only serving police officer, even harder if you actually cared enough to do the job properly. In theory, he was supposed to only work his shifts five days out of seven and when he was off duty any incidents in the village were relayed to the central station in the city.

Bitter experience, however, had taught him that his comrades in the city had their own problems, and somebody using the vicar's parking space came very low down on their list of priorities.

Usually, he popped in most days just to see if anything needed doing - he hadn't had a day off proper in the five years he'd been doing the job. It was only on rare occasions, however, that he found himself trying to grab a few hours sleep in the station before getting back to work in the morning. Occasions such as last night, for example. He'd dropped off to sleep in the early hours of the morning, only to be woken about half an hour ago by the incessant beeping of the fax machine his Chief Super had insisted he had installed.

When he'd checked it, he'd found a two page report waiting for him from his friend in London. It consisted of one page of general information and an old missing persons form, with a note scribbled on it that said *Is this what you wanted?* It was indeed. He wandered over to the kettle and flicked it on, then settled down to read through his faxes.

Dorothy McShane, the first page told him, *born 20th August 1970, Perivale, Gt. London. Mother Audrey McShane, Father . . .* All of this was very interesting, but it wasn't telling him very much. It appeared young Dorothea had been born in Perivale, lived there for a while with her mother whilst her father had gone AWOL. Nothing strange about that, more's the pity. He flicked on to the missing persons.

Missing Person, it told him. *Dorothy McShane*. It went on to give a description of the woman at eighteen, complete with nylon bomber jacket

plastered with badges and a rucksack stuffed with numerous items, including a baseball bat. It sounded to Murphy like she had planned to run away, packing what she could and getting out one night. Shouldn't have taken long to find someone as distinctive as that, though.

He skimmed through the rest of the report to check the dates at the bottom: filed on 23rd November 1987 - she would have been seventeen. Then he saw the final line of the report, newer than the rest. It read: *File cancelled 23.11.93, on UN request.*

Now that was interesting. She'd disappeared ten years ago, with nothing on file for six years - not so much as a caution for loitering - only to reappear with the weight of the UN behind her. Were they picking up runaways now, he wondered. And if so, what for? To use as agents? He wouldn't put it past them - there'd been plenty of stories in the newspapers of late about UN cover ups in the seventies. Perhaps this was another one.

His train of thought was briefly derailed by the sound of a car pulling up outside. Duty calls, he thought as he wandered over to the door, expecting to see an aggrieved villager of some description. Instead, he saw Lars climbing out of his car. Murphy waved at him.

'Morning, Lars,' he said cheerfully. 'You're just in time - the kettle's boiling.'

Lars didn't smile back. He looked different to Murphy somehow - colder, more focused. He was certainly more dishevelled. His pastel blue suit had developed quite a few creases in it since last night. It looked rather like he had been sleeping in it. Under his arm, he was carrying a slim leather hold-all.

‘Everything alright?’ Murphy asked.

‘I’m afraid not, Sergeant Murphy, no,’ he said briskly. ‘This isn’t a social visit.’

Murphy felt his heart skip - a worrying sign at his age. This was something to do with the woman, he reckoned.

‘What’s up?’

Lars looked grim faced.

‘I shall have to ask you to address me as “sir”, Sergeant,’ he said coldly.

‘Yes, sir,’ answered Murphy.

‘That’s better,’ Lars said absently. ‘I shall need your office.’

Lars paced past the Sergeant without even stopping, leaving him to spin around and watch him head for his station. Something must have gone seriously wrong. Not that it excused Lars for being this rude, especially when Murphy had no ties to the military. He hurried after his young friend, and only caught up with him when he was inside the station.

‘Can I remind you, sir,’ said Murphy diplomatically, ‘that this is my station and - officially - you have no jurisdiction here?’

Lars sat himself down in Murphy’s chair and carefully placed the bag on the table top. Then he looked up at Murphy with deep eyes and said:

‘Last night, Sergeant, we had what you may call an incident up at the Manor, yes? As a result of this incident, I have been forced to instigate the Valkyr Procedure. I am required to ask you if you understand what this

means. Do you?'

Murphy's face fell. When he had first taken the job here, he'd been told about Fawney Rig and the vital work they were doing for the government. Vital work that at some point may need the co-operation of the local police. If that was the case, then every available resource - the station, the man-power, even the stationary if they desired it - was to be put at their disposal. The Valkyr Procedure.

'Yes,' said Murphy grimly, 'I understand.'

'Good,' said Lars, pushing the black bag across the desk. 'Now, do you see this bag?'

Murphy nodded. It was a small black leather hold all, in pristine condition. The handles at the top were tied together twice with thin red wire, and a large plastic seal kept it closed.

'This seal,' Lars continued, 'is the British Government diplomatic seal. Only a high ranking Government official can break it - an official like me. Do you understand?'

Murphy nodded dumbly again, biting his tongue. This was not a good time to start snapping at Lars. It could lose him his job, and leave him spending his twilight years in a prison cell.

'You are not such an official,' Lars was saying. 'Under no circumstances are either you yourself or anybody else to open this bag without my express permission. You will personally guard it for me until I - or some other identified government official - come to collect it. This does not include anybody claiming to be from UNIT. If you do allow anybody I do not

personally authorise to open this bag, you will spend the rest of your life in jail. Do you understand that?'

'I understand. Sir.'

Lars smiled, for the first time since he arrived. It was a weary smile, too tired to reach his eyes.

'Good. I'll have coffee, black, please Sergeant.'

Without a word, Murphy went over to the kettle and began pouring two cups of coffee. He didn't even offer a suggestion that he was trained and experienced to be more than a tea-lady. When the coffee was made, he carried the cups over to the desk and handed one to Lars.

'Thank you.'

'You might be interested in that fax on the desk, sir,' Murphy said evenly. 'It's about our visitor last night.'

Lars picked it up and gave it a casual glance, then dropped it back onto the table.

'I already know all that, Sergeant,' he said dismissive.

Of course you do, thought Murphy.

'One of the other duties I want you to perform,' said Lars, 'is to find that woman and arrest her. Understood?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Now, Sergeant. Take the bag with you.'

Murphy glared at Lars over the rim of his coffee cup. The European stared back, stone faced. He calmly put down his coffee cup and picked up

the bag. Before he left, Murphy turned back to Lars and asked:

‘I don’t suppose there’s any chance you might tell me exactly what is going on here, sir?’

‘No, Sergeant,’ answered Lars. ‘No chance what-so-ever.’

Thought not, thought Murphy, and headed out of the door. As he left, he saw Lars pick up the telephone and dial what appeared to be a twenty digit telephone number.

‘Allfather,’ he just heard him say into the mouth piece, ‘this is Vali.’

The sun had almost fully risen now, losing its burnt umber colour and becoming a more fiery yellow. It was shining down on what was turning into the worst day of Murphy’s life. He started walking down towards the village, his newly acquired bag in his hand, and a quiet rage beginning to burn in his chest.

Sophie Wagner was very slowly being driven insane. Somebody was doing it deliberately, that was the only explanation. She had wronged somebody horrendously - either in this life, or a previous one - and now they were extracting their revenge. That was the only explanation possible.

She looked up from her chair to see out of the window. Outside, row after row of the village houses sat with their curtains drawn, blank eyes staring out into the world. The new sun was shining down from over head, fresh and bright. It cast long shadows over the road that Sophie stared at. It was still empty. Soon it would be filled full of people on their way to Greater Sarfield, or

to the village shop, or doing whatever it was her neighbours did on the weekend. She didn't care: she was only looking for one familiar face.

She had spent the night travelling between the telephone and the window, alternately staring at the empty road to the silent phone. Once she had picked it up, expecting to hear nothing, but the steady pulse of the dialling tone sang out. Then she had hurried over to the window and flung it open. If he wasn't ringing, then it could only mean that he was so near home that it would be pointless. Nothing. There was, of course, another reason why he might not be ringing, but she wasn't thinking about that.

She had spent most of the early morning like that until, exhausted, she had fallen into a fitful sleep in her chair. She had dreamt that Stevie had come back, grinning all over his face, carrying box after box of shopping from the city, all the best stores.

'I won,' this dream lover had said, his bright eyes dancing, 'won so much damned money I just had to go out and spend some of it. Here.'

And he'd handed over the most beautiful clothes and knick-knacks, and it had been such an understandable explanation, that she'd just reached up and hugged him. He unloaded bag after bag, silk skirts, designer tops, jewellery that would make the queen jealous, the last book to complete her collection of children's' stories - the one that all the publishers had told her had been out of print for fifteen years and she would be very lucky to find - even a new book that she'd never even heard of. Stevie had handed them all to her, smiling all the time. He was so good to her, and she loved him so much.

Then she woken up and realised it had all been a dream. She turned to tell Stevie about it, and then woke up some more and remembered that Stevie hadn't come home. Then she cried.

And as the sun had risen, Sophie had dried her tears, knowing exactly what she had to do. She picked up the telephone and dialled the sergeant's number. She had to report Stevie officially a missing person. The phone hummed quietly to her, singing out an engaged tone. She put it down quickly again, in case Stevie was out there somewhere, trying to ring through. She would try the sergeant again in a couple of minutes. At least that would give Stevie a couple more minutes to get in touch, before . . .

She remembered the first time she'd met him, both of them heading into Whitehall on differing business. He'd been there to discuss some contract his firm in America had set up, and she'd been there to try and set up a catering contract for the government kitchens. He'd been successful, she hadn't: she hadn't been too upset, her catering business was strong and could survive without them; and besides, she'd met Stevie.

Most men she met usually took a few hours to get over the guilt they felt for something that wasn't even their fault. Not Stevie. He'd held to door open for her, smiled cheerfully - the way he did - and talked to her like a normal human being. Perhaps it was something to do with being American. Whatever it was, she liked it. He hadn't even tried to wheel her down the corridor, wisely deciding to leave her to her own arm power.

By the time she'd come out of her meeting - feeling slightly upset that they had chosen her cheaper and nastier rivals for the contract - she'd found

Stevie waiting outside for her. He'd smiled, asked how she'd got on and - after actually listening to her reply - offered to take her out for dinner to cheer her up. Before then, she'd never known it was possible for people to be that confidant - the quickest she'd ever been asked out by anyone was after a wait of five weeks.

Of course she'd said yes, as she had when six months later Stevie had told her he was planning on staying in the country, in a little village somewhere out in Derbyshire, and asked if she wanted to stay with him. They'd been married just weeks later, a small ceremony without either sets of parents: Stevie's couldn't make it from America in time, and hers just wouldn't make it. And now he was missing.

She picked up the telephone again and dialled the station. This time the telephone was answered by a gruff voice she half recognised.

'Hello?' it barked.

'Hello?' she said meekly.

'Allfather?' the voice asked.

'No,' answered Sophie, by now totally confused. 'I'm trying to report . . .'

'Then go away,' the voice interrupted, and the telephone was slammed down.

Sophie held on to the telephone, staring out of the window in bewilderment. She must have got a wrong number, that was the only possible explanation. She tried dialling the number again, watching her finger carefully in case it slipped onto a wrong number. It didn't, and the telephone was

answered again.

‘Allfather?’ the same voice barked.

‘I’m trying to reach Sergeant Murphy,’ Sophie said as calmly and firmly as she could manage. ‘Can you put me through to him, please.’

The voice on the other end of the telephone sighed. She was sure she recognised it.

‘Sergeant Murphy is no longer in charge here, madam, and he has far more important things to do now than sort out your minor little problem. Please do not ring here again. Thank you,’ he said, and the telephone was slammed down again.

Sophie stared at the telephone for a second of blank amazement. Then with a scream of rage she pulled the entire phone away from the table and flung it across the room. It sailed through the air with an almost graceful ease, spinning as it went, the receiver flying behind it like a comet’s tail. Then it reached the window. It didn’t stop. With a loud crash, it continued on, landing outside in the garden amidst a shower of glass.

Sophie barely even noticed. She was too busy crying into her hands. Stevie was missing, probably lying dead in some ditch, and now nobody cared, not even the police. She’d ring her mother, but she wouldn’t care. And besides, the phone wasn’t working any more. So instead, she cried.

‘Excuse me,’ said a quiet, calm voice.

She looked up to see a wire haired little man standing in her front garden, peering through the fresh new hole in the window. There was something about his clothes that struck her as odd, but individually the tweed

jacket and the red waistcoat seemed perfectly normal, counter-pointing his five-year-old's smile perfectly. In his hands he was holding her battered telephone.

'I found this outside,' he said, still grinning like a small boy with a fistful of worms. 'I thought you might want it back.'

Sophie took one look at him, and burst into a fresh bout of tears.

SIX

Little Sarfield: 24. November, 2003

07:13

Wolsey the Hunter lay quietly curled up in a shaft of light coming in through the curtains. His claws occasionally dug deep into the polished veneer of a Chippendale table, his fur finding its way onto every last piece of fabric in the house. The sun felt good, warmed him through in ways that reminded him of being a kitten, that sunk into his bones. His stomach was empty, but the sun was so alluring that he could wait for food. He could wait for anything, as long as he was warm and dry.

And that was the problem. No matter how warm his antique bed was, there was a coldness rubbing at the back of his head that he just couldn't shake. A coldness that came from having a Sibling who insisted on traipsing

out into the cold morning air and getting herself covered in the fine morning mist. Wolsey could feel the nip in the air through her, feel the bite of the morning in her lungs, see the bright and warming sun darkened by her eye coverings. And even though it would take more than a trek up a hill to shift Wolsey from his rest, in some irritating way, he was right there inside her.

Not that he wasn't ready, at the slightest hint of a need, to jump to her side, all tooth and claw, Wolsey the Protector again. No matter how warm the sun, no matter how cold the day, he always kept one corner of his mind focussed on her, had since that first evening on the hill. He could see what she saw now, the green grass rolling away, the huddle of the village deep in the valley hiding away from the two houses overlooking it. He could see the dark Not-Brother beside her, his long dusty coat with scents from a thousand corners of the world – some Wolsey had smelled himself, some he hadn't and never would. He could see the mist catch on the stubble clinging to his head, see the sun reflect in the coffee skin. He could feel the warmth in the pit of his Sibling's stomach that she felt whenever he spoke, when she spoke to him. And he could hear what they were saying.

'How did they convince you to take a break?' the dark man asked, his feet sinking into the mud. Wolsey could feel it give beneath his Sibling's boots, hear her curse it even though the route was her choice. The only sensible choice, stalking up from behind.

'No choice,' his Sibling said, eyes on the horizon. 'Police Box incident in Edinburgh. The D-'

'*He*'s travelling with Ace I take it,' the dark man interrupted. A flash of

irritation, soon passed, soon past.

‘Yeah, he is,’ a smiled apology.

‘And the Manor?’

Wolsey felt something in her give, recognised it. Years together, and they could read each other as only Siblings could: a pang of that feeling he got when he remembered himself, his younger self, and the foolish things he did. Kittenshame.

‘Unfinished business,’ she said out loud, whilst Wolsey remembered Paris.

‘Because if it’s not important, I’d leave it,’ the dark man said, his eyes elsewhere. Wolsey’s ears twitched – a scent in the air, something familiar.

‘What d’you know about it?’

‘Government,’ he said. ‘Very high up. Very important. Very dangerous.’

‘And they wouldn’t let me in.’

‘They don’t let anyone in. Or out.’

‘This should get me in anywhere,’ he felt her pat the booklet in her pocket, felt the pride it gave her. ‘But not there.’

‘Built when King George was on the throne, a manor house for the local squire, five bedrooms, stables round the back. But you don’t want to know about that.’

‘No.’

‘Sold off in the late seventies, and renamed Fawney Rig about the same time by the new owners,’ he said.

‘What was it before then?’ asked his Sibling.

‘Wych Manor,’ replied the dark man, ‘after the elm trees, I suppose.’

And Wolsey saw it, as his Sister saw it, standing firm on the muddy ground, eyes half-open, sizing it up. It sat in a den of shadows, despite the warm sun, the cool air. It brooded. All around it was a fence that Wolsey knew would bite, kill. The windows dark and shaded, no trees too close to the fence, only one way in, one way out. And it sat there, and challenged them: hunt me, chase me, take me if you can. Or I will take you. And still that scent hung in the air, tantalising, reaching out of the warmth of his table-top bed, half-remembered.

‘Most people assume the House is a manor house too,’ the dark man said, close behind her. ‘They never think to wonder why there’d be two of them, why they’re built so far from the village. But we know all about that.’

Silence. His Sister watching, feeling the remembered emotions of that day flood across her. Putting it behind her. He put an arm on her shoulder, and she let it stay there. It felt heavy, awkward to Wolsey, put she only felt the warmth radiate out. And he smelt the air, and his eyes opened.

‘Can’t you just jump in?’ he heard the dark man say.

‘It’s not something I like to do too often,’ the Sister replied. ‘It only makes the virus stronger.’

Half a second, and Wolsey the Hunter tensed every muscle in his body, his tail twitching in the light. His claws gripped the table, scarring the ancient wood. His legs tensed, flexed, pushed, and his mind opened. A second, and Wolsey the Protector landed in the soft mud, his claws sinking deep, the mist

catching in his dark fur. He felt, saw his Sister see him, felt her heart jump with the shock of it, the guilt. And Wolsey the Protector smelt the air again, and tasted death.

‘Something’s wrong,’ he heard his Sibling say, but if she’d been paying attention, if she’d been aware, she would have smelt it too. But there was no need for that: she knew. And Wolsey was already halfway to the Manor.

He felt his Sister in the back of his head, heard her racing silently behind, heard the dark man thumping down behind her. He knew she could see through his eyes, as he could see through hers, but neither would falter. Neither would tumble, as the double vision disorientated them, as they had in the beginning. They would use it to their advantage, each seeing, each knowing, but each remaining always themselves. And it was as it always was: Wolsey heading the charge, scenting the danger, and his Sister coming from behind, to protect him.

He was by the fence in a moment, not even looking at the Manor, but sniffing the air again. It was there, overpoweringly strong. Blood, raw meat, death. It only took a second to find the body, thrown casually into the guard’s hut, crumpled on the floor, stained crimson red. The blood was dry, but the kill was fresh. Two wounds, one through the neck, one splitting the torso open. A clean kill, with a metal claw. The prey would have died quickly, and silently. Wolsey crept closer, senses aware for even the slightest hint of the hunter. Nothing, except his Sister and the dark man behind her.

‘We’re in trouble,’ he said.

‘Professional job,’ she said. ‘One through the voice-box so they can’t

scream, then gut'em like a kipper.'

'I'd better go in.'

'No,' she said firmly, her insides steel. '*We'd* better go in.'

'Okay.'

'Be careful, Chile.'

'Always, Thea.'

And Wolsey left the meat: it had told all it had to tell. Whatever had hunted, killed, had been strong and fast, and left no scent. And he could feel that his Sibling knew it too.

'Wait,' the dark man said. 'Electric fence.'

Wolsey felt the shock as his Sibling watched the dark man place his palms on the fence, expecting sparks to fly. Nothing. He turned briefly to her, smiling with flat teeth. Then the gate was opened, and Wolsey was where he should be: at his Sister's side. The dark man bowed, stepping aside to let them through. Into the killer's nest.

'After you,' he said.

Slowly, cautiously, they went in.

Sergeant Murphy walked through his village, as he had every morning of his life, turning at all the familiar places, eyes drinking in sights that had barely changed since he was a boy. But it was no longer the same, hadn't been these last few years since *that* night. People had moved away, taking

most of the village's life with it. Those that stayed made sure they locked their doors at night now. The chapel up ahead was dusty and dark, its windows still broken, no-one coming to replace the windows or the verger. And since the House stopped taking in guests, no strangers came to Little Sarfield any more. Sophie and Steve were the only new people to move to the village since it happened, and now Steve was missing, Sophie beside herself. He altered his route slightly: even though he was meant to be looking for Dorothea, he could still check on Sophie.

His new route took him passed the school house, all boarded up and dead, a symbol of what life in the village was now. Those children that still remained caught the bus into Bexston Moss, the next village along. They didn't play in the streets any more: their parents didn't like to leave them alone, and they didn't like the way the villagers looked at them, regrets tinged with envy. This was no place to bring up children now, not the sunny afternooned marble pit of his childhood. The village was slowly dying, and now this business with Lars and the Manor looked like it would finish them all off. Something in the bag tapping lightly at his side was going to kill all of them. He could feel it in the air, like he'd felt it that one time before.

He felt his heart skip when he turned onto Steve's road: he could see their neat little house sat as it always did, comfortable in its trimmed garden; he could see glass all over the neat lawn, see a hole where their window used to be. But even as he ran, he didn't let go of the bag in his hand, never forgot for one second its clammy feel against his palm, never stopped wondering what was in it, what would happen when it was opened.

And when he got there, he found himself staring through the hole in the window, looking down at Sophie in her wheelchair, pale and delicate still dressed for bed. Her head snapped round immediately, fixing him with such a stare he felt faint. But he saw her face fall in an instant, realising she'd hoped he was Steve. Then she caught his eye again, saying:

'Have you found Stevie?'

The Sergeant shook his head, slowly, feeling each string in his heart give and break for this broken woman. First nature had dealt her a cruel blow from childhood, and now she had lost the one man who she could love.

'What happened to your window?'

She looked away, embarrassed.

'I . . . had an accident with the telephone. But someone fixed it for me.'

Sophie motioned into the back of her home, across the always empty floor to one of the chairs in the back. There was a dark shape sat there, fingers arched, cup of tea at his elbow. He hadn't noticed him before, concentrating on Sophie and with him so silent. For a second he wondered who this man was, so casually at home with Sophie, but then he saw the smile, those eyes. He felt his heart stop, his mouth go dry. He heard him say "Trust me. We'll stop this creature now," somewhere in the dark corners of his memory, the corners he didn't like to go back to, filled as they were with dead children and tooth and claw.

'How do you do,' said the little whirlwind, rising to his feet. 'This is my friend Sophie, and I'm –'

'The Doctor,' the Sergeant finished flatly, seeing the question in the

man’s eyes.

The Doctor was here. So it was official. It was the end of the world.

The creature moved silently across the valley rim, its stealth belying its massive frame. It kept itself out of the sunlight as far as was possible, well aware that it didn’t want to be seen if it could help it. It was hunting.

SOLAR FILTERS ACTIVE. SEEK AND DESTROY TARGET. DESIGNATION: HOSTILE HUMAN - **DANGEROUS**.

It stopped briefly, using a patch of trees to cover it while it scanned the surrounding area. To its left, open countryside of no tactical value - except that its centre would be an easy position to defend. To its right, hidden down in the valley, was the centre of human habitation. It would be an easy attack, coming down from the higher ground with superior firepower. They would have the advantage, and the humans wouldn’t stand a chance. But first, it had its mission.

Its scan paused briefly on the lip of the valley. Running along the top of the hills was a regular metal track - presumably a guide for some kind of motored vehicle. An inefficient system, no doubt - without the manoeuvrability required of a weapon of war, and easy to disable. One well placed charge could destroy both track and vehicle. Sitting across from the track was a hut, crudely prefabricated from some kind of wood. Outside was another crude vehicle: a four wheeled motor vehicle, lacking in decent armour and weaponry. The target had been seen driving such a vehicle. It deserved

attention.

SCANNING: MAGNIFICATION SCALE 200%.

The vehicle was empty and of no tactical importance - the creature itself was stronger than the vehicle's thin frame. The building too was no stronghold. It could make out one large viewing port made out of some fragile transparent material, and its one door was made of the same weak wood as its shell. As a fortress it was sadly lacking, and could easily be taken. It had some kind of sign hanging above the door, the words POLICE STATION written on it.

The creature considered this.

REFERENCE: "POLICE STATION".

Within half a second, a stream of data entered its mind, giving it the information it required. The building was a base of operations for the local peace-keeping force. Records indicated that if the occupants were armed, it was unlikely that their weapons would be dangerous to it. There was, however, the possibility that the occupants could be dangerous, especially if they came into contact with the target. If nothing else, they were a respected symbol amongst the humans and could possibly orchestrate some form of resistance to invasion. It would be best if they were destroyed.

SCAN COMPLETE. BUILDING STRUCTURE WEAK. OCCUPANTS: ONE HUMAN TARGET - POSSIBLE CONVERSION. SCANNING FOR SUITABILITY.

The creature continued on towards the building, preparing itself for

combat. All of its sensors were working at 100%, and its weapons systems were also ready. Then it stopped.

SCAN COMPLETE. HUMAN TARGET MATCHES BIO-SCAN FOR TARGET, DESIGNATION: HOSTILE HUMAN **DANGEROUS**. SUITABILITY: NIL. **TARGET TO BE ELIMINATED**. SCANNING FOR STOLEN DEVICE.

The creature continued forward, preparing to complete its mission. Then the invasion could begin.

SCAN COMPLETE: STOLEN DEVICE NOT PRESENT.

The creature stopped again, assimilating this information. The target had stolen the device. It was vital that it was returned. The target no longer had the device. The only logical conclusion was that the target had hidden the device, and if that was the case then the elimination would have to be suspended. It was more important to retrieve the device, no matter how dangerous the target was. The logical approach would be to let the target lead it to the device, then destroy him.

SEEK AND DESTROY PROGRAM: SUSPENDED. SURVEILLANCE ON HUMAN TARGET INITIATED.

The creature settled itself in an easy to maintain position, careful not to reveal itself to the target yet also making sure the position could be defended if need be. It was willing to wait as long as it took. It had briefly considered capturing the target and torturing it to reveal the device's location, but it had been abandoned almost as quickly. Humans were notoriously treacherous,

especially this one: it could try to use the device as a bargaining tool. It would be much simpler to allow him to lead it to the device in ignorance.

As it continued with its surveillance, the creature's processors stumbled across a message being relayed on some outdated radio-wave system. It hadn't discovered it at first, its processors scanning the more likely frequencies and systems: it was another mark of the weakness of any likely resistance that they still used such outdated communication methods. However, the signal was coming from the small "POLICE STATION" building, and one of the speakers had already been identified as the target before the creature had even begun to digest the content.

'He's hear? Gott,' the target said, deep inside the creature. 'If he's here it must be a full scale operation. Keep him there until I arrive.'

'Alright, I'll do my best. Got to go: Sophie's at the door. Out.'

And the signal ended. So the target was on the move. The creature's processors immediately came up with the plan: SURVEILLANCE – SEEK, FOLLOW, INFORM.

It didn't have to wait long. It soon saw the target leave, heading for the vehicle. Now that it no longer had to scan through walls, the creature could obtain a visual confirmation of the target's identity. It had the same distinguishing features - the blue colouring to the fabrics it wore, the shape of the face, all of these things - plus a few internal scans - confirmed its identity. It watched him climb into the vehicle and drive away.

The creature considered briefly following immediately, but it knew that the target's vehicle would stay within visual range for several minutes, and

there was still the problem of the “POLICE STATION” to be solved. If the humans had any weapons, it was likely that they would be stock-piled within the building. It would have to be destroyed.

As the car sped away, the creature rose and paced over to the station. A small panel opened up where - if it was human - its stomach would have been. It reached inside with slender digits and pulled out a small flat black dome. As it headed for the station, it pushed a single finger into the thin membranous surface of the device. Somewhere deep inside, a red light began to pulse regularly.

Lars drove his car at a comfortable pace down towards the village, keeping a watchful eye on each of his mirrors. That was why, when he was deafened, he knew exactly what had happened.

First there was a flash of brilliant white light from behind him, then a loud *crump* that left his ears ringing. Then he saw the flames and the debris frying into the air behind him. It was all he could do to keep his car on the road as the surprise threw his heart into his throat. Someone had blown up the police station. No, he corrected himself, something.

So it had traced him there. He could only just have got out in time - there could be no doubt that the bomb had been intended to claim him. Well, he had escaped it, he was still alive, despite its efforts. Perhaps, he thought, it’s not as invincible as we thought.

It was all he could do not to whistle as he continued down into the

village. As he drove, he failed to notice a large shape following some distance behind, using the hedgerows for cover. It was moving just as fast as the car, the distance between the two never changing a millimetre. Steadily, tirelessly, the creature was following him.

SEVEN

Little Sarfield: 24. November, 2003

07:45

Getting into the Manor was easy, a manoeuvre that had been practiced time and time again: Wolsey crept in through whatever gaps he could find, open windows, missing roof tiles, whatever. Once in, Dorothea directed him to the back door where, almost invariably, people always left the key in the lock: if not in, then definitely nearby. It was the same with the Manor – security became more relaxed when they didn't expect anyone to make it passed the front gate. With careful precision jumping and biting, Wolsey could extract the key, and carry it out to Dorothea outside. Then it was just a question of turning the key, and walking in.

'Neat trick,' said Chile.

‘You should see him order out for pizza,’ Dorothea replied, a wave of pride ruffling the fur on Wolsey’s neck.

The back door led into a scullery, which in turn opened out into the kitchens: five huge stoves clearly spaced around the room, looking like they could have coped with an army. Only two of them showed signs of recent use, the other three starting to grow a coat of dust and grease. Pots and pans hung down from the ceiling, knives left by chopping blocks half covered with onion, pots filled with water lay cold on the stoves. There was an uneasy silence that hung in the air.

‘Looks like they left in a hurry,’ Dorothea said, Wolsey winding around her feet, trying to hold her back, protect her.

‘Be careful,’ Chile whispered.

‘Always,’ Dorothea replied, half-smiling. But already her senses were dancing, tasting the air ahead.

With barely an effort, she made herself go, opening her eyes wide and seeing with Wolsey. She smelt through his nose, her senses his, his a thousand times sharper than hers alone, and as one they began to advance. There was a time when the double perspective confused her, left her clutching out blind for something to hold on to. Not now. Now it was the greatest gift she had ever been given, and it had saved her life more times that she had dared to count.

She saw the corridor from above and below as they walked from the kitchens out into the main hallway. She could feel Wolsey’s anxieties merging with hers, feeding her adrenaline, feeding the virus. It didn’t matter: there were

more important things to consider. There was not a single soul in the house, and the air stank with blood. Something was very wrong.

‘Which way?’ Chile asked, but Wolsey was already pacing to where the scent grew stronger. It was another well practiced manoeuvre: the small kitling tested the ground ahead, often unseen, and then the muscle followed.

The kitling pushed through large double doors, slightly ajar, and paused, sniffing the air. Dorothea could feel the blood seeping into her, saturating her every sense. She could feel the excitement it filled Wolsey with, and didn’t hate him for it. Years of practice, they knew each other too well.

He was in a huge ballroom, high panelled walls holding up a high panelled ceiling. The floor was made up of thousands of tessellated wooden blocks, and would have once been polished up to a brilliant shine. Over in the corner of the room was a shoddily panelled over alcove that had probably - judging from the height and shape - once been a bar. In the middle of the ceiling there was a yawning gap where a crystal chandelier had once hung. The place looked like it should have been filled with a throbbing mass of people dancing the foxtrot, sipping on cocktails and discussing what Roddy was doing since he got back from the war. Instead, it had been gutted - everything of value stripped away and sold - and left for dead.

It wasn’t completely empty, however. There were massive metal benches dotted around the room, with power cables hanging down from the ceiling that once housed decorative lights. The benches were dotted with complex looking tools and old bits of wire, but also with clear spaces where obviously something else had sat. Computers sat on each desk, obviously

very expensive and top of the range, obviously connected to a network. Each and every one of them was smashed to pieces, smouldering slightly.

‘Somebody’s cleaned the place out,’ Chile said.

Dorothea nodded mutely as they moved cautiously in, still half looking through Wolsey’s eyes. When she saw them, she saw them twice: looking up at her, her looking up at them.

‘Oh my God!’ she said softly.

‘What?’ Chile started to say, but as he moved round the desks, he saw them too. Fifteen bodies, men and women all in the same plain khaki uniform, all dead. Wolsey was sniffing experimentally at one of them, a young woman barely into her twenties. Red hair and dull, glassy blue eyes.

Each of the bodies had been carefully placed, Dorothea realised, so that they couldn’t be seen from the doorway. Anyone looking in would see the wrecked computers, but not the dead bodies. She had seen them first through Wolsey, and then moved to see them herself. She examined one of them carefully, guiding Wolsey’s eyes over the body inch by each. She had been killed by the same kind of sword that had done for the guard outside – her corpse was practically cut in half by the blade, the edges of the wound neat and clean. The throat was undamaged, so they had all been done at once, with some speed. This far away from the village, no-one would have heard their screams, not even the most supernaturally acute ears.

‘Look at this one,’ Chile said, crouched by a stockily built forty-year-old, an unreadable expression on his face. He had seen more dead bodies in his time than Dorothea could even imagine. Probably the same amount as the

Doctor. ‘Plasma burn cut right through him. Somebody’s using some very advanced technology.’

‘Anachronistic?’ Dorothea suggested. Chile nodded. ‘Come on, let’s keep moving.’

‘Where to?’

‘Something killed these people,’ she said firmly. ‘Either they were working on something that somebody else thought was worth killing to get, or else what they were working on didn’t take to kindly to it. We’re going to find out which it was.’

Chile nodded, but Dorothea didn’t notice. She was already out into the corridors, her Kitling forerunner padding silently through the dark corridors and empty rooms. In some ways, the building seemed absurdly large to her, vast cavernous rooms viewed through Wolsey’s eyes. But as she followed behind, crouched ready to spring, heart pounding in her ears, she felt the weight of every brick and tile above her. The Manor was afraid, death stalking its gloomy corridors, and any visitor was an unwelcome one. If she could, Dorothea would have ran, turned and got herself back to the sunlight, a warm spot to curl up in. But she didn’t. She was Dorothea McShane, and this was what she did. She didn’t even reach out for Chile’s hand as he padded close behind her.

‘Thea,’ he whispered, but she held up a hand for silence. Wolsey had found something.

She felt the cold tiled floor under his paws, felt the light as it burned onto his retina, smelt the blood in the air. She didn’t follow him into the room –

she didn't need to. God knows what it had been in the days of the Manor, but now it was a small, sterile operating theatre. There was barely anything in there: just the central table, chromed and impassive; the white tiled walls, somehow giving off enough light to blind Wolsey after the darkness of the corridor; the large – and destroyed – computer at the head of the table; the disembowelled corpse lying on the floor, the blood congealing on the pristine floor.

'What is it?' Chile asked, looking deep into her eyes, seeing only his own reflected back.

'Operating table,' Dorothea replied, flatly. 'Dead surgeon. One through the neck, then through the chest. Looks like he was the first to go. No, don't go in. There's nothing you can do.'

'They were working on humans?' Chile asked. He was speaking to Dorothea's hand again, as her eyes darted this way and that along the ceiling. 'What?'

'Shh!' she snapped, still scanning the ceiling.

Every sense straining, ignoring Wolsey, stretching her ears out as far as they would go, willing her eyes to bore through the ceiling. She could hear Chile breathing beside her – despite his years of experience, he could never get quiet enough for Dorothea – practically hear his heart beating in his chest. She could hear her own heart pounding heavy in her ears, pushing the tainted blood through her veins. And she could hear . . .

Dorothea fixed Chile with a firm stare, and whispered softly:

'There's someone upstairs.'

Slowly, all eyes went to the ceiling.

SCANNING. MAGNIFICATION: 150%.

The creature hid itself in the alcove created by two of the weak structured buildings and watched as the target pulled his vehicle up. His position wasn't easy to defend, the building constructed from an inferior baked clay composition and dotted with more of the fragile window coverings. If the target was hoping to entrench himself, he hadn't chosen a particularly strong place to do so. But he was in a built up area that he knew well - the home advantage could never be over-estimated. The creature would have to keep itself in the shadows, not betray its presence until it knew the situation: if the device wasn't inside the building, then it didn't want to forewarn the target. So it simply watched as the target entered the building.

VISUAL MODE SWITCHING: INFRARED SELECTED.

It watched the two humans - the human target and the undesignated target - walk through the building into a large room at the front of the building. The creature realised that it could now see all of the building's target through the windows, and switched back to its usual hi-resolution vision. There were three non-designated targets inside the building, all grouped together for an easy kill.

BEGINNING SCAN.

From the moment the stranger pushed passed her into the front room, Sophie hated him. She hated everything about him: the way he glanced down at her, contempt clearly etched on his face; the way he ignored her, as if it wasn't her home he was invading; the way he marched straight up to the Doctor and thrust himself into his face. Yes, she particularly hated him for that. And when he spoke, and she recognised his voice, she hated him all the more.

'Out to the car,' the stranger snapped, his voiced clipped and German. Harsher than it had been on the telephone. 'Everybody. Now.'

'Are we going on a picnic?' the Doctor asked innocently, grinning the most genuine smile Sophie had seen in her life. If she hadn't been so busy hating the stranger, she would've smiled right back.

'Is this him, Murphy?'

Sophie saw the Sergeant eye the stranger cautiously, and immediately guessed that he hated him too. That was good. She liked the Sergeant, and she hated the stranger. But there was still undue respect in his voice as he answered:

'This is the Doctor, yes. Sir.'

'We don't need UNIT here, do you understand?' Lars snapped, nose to nose with the Doctor.

'You don't?' the Doctor echoed, the picture of innocence.

'I've put a call in to the Prime Minister himself. Within two hours, a whole troop of His Majesty's finest will be here. They won't need you lot

getting under their feet. Do I make myself clear?'

'As crystal, Mr . . ?'

The Sergeant tried to intercede:

'This is Lars. He works at Fawney Rig.'

'And you are going to come with me to the car, or you are all going to die. Do you understand?'

And that was enough for her. Wheeling herself forward, Sophie threw an accusing finger up at Lars, pulling her most harpy-like face. It wasn't difficult. She just thought about every second of last night, terrified for Stevie, terrified of being left alone. And she thought about Stevie not coming back yet, still out there somewhere, lost, hurt, alone. And she thought about a telephone being slammed down on her when she most needed a reassuring voice. After that, the anger came easily. It was easy to intimidate someone who was towering over you, but Sophie could manage it: the chair did most of the work, she just had to remember how much she hated him.

'No, you listen to me,' she snapped, all eyes on her. 'This is my home. I live here. I didn't invite you in here. You can't just barge in and start threatening us like that.'

'Madam,' Lars said, mind elsewhere.

'No, don't you madam me!' she was in a flow now, every second of her worry coming pouring out. She was so absorbed, she didn't even notice the Sergeant standing, bone white, staring out of the window. 'I'm not having a good day. My husband's missing. I refuse to put up with you as well.'

'If you don't do exactly what I say, you will die. This is not a threat, this

is a statement of fact, yes?'

'Oh my God,' whispered the Sergeant.

All eyes on him now. The Doctor half turned, said:

'Sergeant?'

'Everybody get down,' he managed to say, already turning away from the window.

Then all hell broke lose.

A second passed. Then:

SCAN COMPLETE.

Another millisecond, then:

STOLEN DEVICE PRESENT. TARGETS IDENTIFIED AS: - KNOWN HUMAN TARGET DESIGNATION **DANGEROUS**, UNKNOWN HUMAN MALE (UNSUITABLE FOR CONVERSION), UNKNOWN HUMAN FEMALE (UNSUITABLE FOR CONVERSION). FINAL TARGET . . . REFERENCING.

For an eighth of a second, the creature paused, unsure what to do for the first time. Deep within its mind, data channels that had remained so far untouched were bursting into life, filling its mind with a flood of data. The device was present, the human target was present, it should complete its mission. And yet, it waited.

Two eighths of a second, then . . .

FINAL TARGET IDENTIFIED: GALLIFREYAN MALE DOCTOR TARGET. TARGET DESIGNATION: **EXTREMELY DANGEROUS**. *VEN MAQU IS* PROGRAM INITIATED. PRIORITY MISSION: ELIMINATION OF GALLIFREYAN MALE DOCTOR TARGET. NOTIFYING LIEUTENANT OF CHANGE IN MISSION.

The creature saw the *Ven Maqu Is* illuminated within its field of vision in a bright, lurid red. He was towards the back of the group, using their bodies for protection. He was a good soldier, one who understood the value of his pawns for protecting his life. He would be a worthy kill.

It's kill in its sights, the creature powered up its weapons systems to full, stepped out into the road and aimed at the window.

The window exploded in a shower of glass, cutting the Sergeant's back to ribbons. The force of the blast knocked Murphy into the back of Sophie's chair, tipping it over and leaving them both screaming in pain on the floor. Lars was thrown into the Doctor's arms, who caught and righted him in one swift movement. Smoke and sunlight flooded into the room – whatever had forced them to the floor had also set fire to Sophie's floral patterned sofa. Which was supposed to be fireproof. No time for that now. She had to get herself back into her chair, before . . .

Before the ringing in their ears had stopped and the smoke cleared, the creature appeared in the gaping hole that had once been the front of Sophie's

house. It stood a clear seven feet, filling most of the missing wall with its massive frame, the sunlight glinting off its polished body. It stood immobile, its head turning slowly from left to right.

WHERE IS THE DOCTOR? it said in a voice like thunder, and it was then that Sophie knew she was going to die.

They sat crouched in the corridor, silent, Chile's eyes on Dorothea, Dorothea's eyes through Wolsey's. To Chile, she looked ready to pounce, her eyes hidden behind dark glasses, her mouth just a thin line. They had sat like this for several minutes, ever since Wolsey had jumped upstairs. Chile had no idea what she could see, who she could see, and although he wanted to know more than anything, he didn't say a word. He wasn't sure she'd hear him even if he did. Only a mother could love her when she was like this.

It was always the silence that got to him first. His ears weren't as sensitive as hers, his eyes not able to cut through the gloom. Even though he knew she could do it better, even though he knew she would be just as sensitive to world around her as the world around Wolsey, Chile kept straining to see either end of the corridor, to hear the killer approaching. He didn't like the idea of waiting for them to find him, find Dorothea. But he didn't like the idea of charging around blindly looking for them any more. He just wished Dorothea would say something.

A sharp intake of breath, and he saw tension ripple through the muscles in Dorothea's shoulders. He wanted to reach out, put a reassuring

hand on her shoulder, but he was afraid of losing it.

‘What is it?’ he whispered. Nothing.

But he knew something was wrong. She was leaning forward, tense. He could feel her wanting to burst to life, run faster than she had run before, faster than he could keep up, but she remained still. He knew she could feel Wolsey’s every movement as if it were her own, knew that the Kitling was in trouble, had seen something. It would have been sensible to run then, but only Dorothea knew which way to go: she had seen the face of the killer. Chile was still alone in the dark.

She moved forward, as if to pounce, and let a hiss of pain escape her lips.

Suddenly, the corridor was filled with the stench of burning hair, the smell catching in the back of Chile’s throat, making him want to gag. He thought for a moment it was him or Dorothea, until he saw Wolsey frantically rubbing himself against Dorothea’s legs, the hairs on his tail singed and smoking. Dorothea was on her feet in seconds, grabbing Chile’s arm without even looking, pulling him back down the corridor. Without even thinking, Chile began running in step behind her, Wolsey pacing along behind them. He could see Dorothea’s head flicking this way and that, looking for something.

‘What is it?’ he asked.

‘We have to move,’ she snapped, not looking at him, ‘or we’re dead.’

And upstairs, Chile could hear heavy footsteps pacing firmly along with them.

‘What did you see?’ Chile asked.

‘This way,’ was his only reply.

Dorothea dragged him again, leading them away from the kitchens, down another corridor, away from the front hall and the stairs leading up. Or down. He hoped she knew where she was going as door after door whizzed by, hoped some innate instinct was leading her to the sunshine, hoped it even as the corridor ended in front of them, leaving her circling, lost for a few seconds. She soon regained her composure, kicking open the door with a thud that made Chile wince, pushing them both through.

‘Oh God,’ he whispered, his eyes swinging from one corner of the room to the other. Even Dorothea stopped for a moment, Wolsey tugging impatiently at her heels.

Chile looked at all of it, every last piece of equipment from every last corner of the Manor, thrown casually across the floor. Boxes of computer discs, paper files, blue-prints all thrown into a pile in the middle of the room. But not just that, other things too. Huge jars of sterile fluid with massive silver arms floating in them, half-dissected pieces of machinery, large silver hands lying disembodied, looking for all the world like deadly silver spiders. He watched as Dorothea paced over to a collection of large silver rifles, each one covered with input sockets and a single tiny blue screen. It looked like it was designed for one hand, but she had to hold it in two. She checked it over, expertly, in a second.

‘Dead,’ she said, but Chile had found something else.

‘Look in here,’ he said.

He motioned to a large door at the other end of the room, the glass

mirror clouded over with frost. Despite the ice, he could just manage to see inside. There were five or six massive silver shapes, each a broad shouldered man of about seven-feet tall. Each made entirely out of some polished metal. Each of them was a slightly different design to the others – some had glass jaws, some merely a cloth pulled taut over the face – but each of them had three similar features: empty round eyes, thin slit-like mouth, computer embedded in the chest. He stood back so that Dorothea could get a clearer view.

‘Cybermen,’ she breathed.

‘What?’ Chile wanted to say, but found that his voice wouldn’t work. All of a sudden, he couldn’t get the words to come out, only a bubbling rasp that didn’t seem to come from his mouth. He tried to look down, but his head wouldn’t move. But out of the corner of his eye, he could see something sticking out of his neck, something that glinted in the light. Something so sharp, he hadn’t even felt it.

Dorothea turned, a sentence half on her lips, and then she saw it.

In the second she had to save herself, she drank in every last detail of the scene. She saw Chile, stood dazed and confused, trying to speak. Saw the blade coming out of his neck, puncturing his voice box so he couldn’t scream too loud when his belly was slit open. Saw the blade run from the back of his neck and into the giant’s silver forearm. Saw the giant’s other arm pointing at her, the hand dropped out of the way to reveal the barrel of a weapon embedded in the other forearm. Saw the giant staring down at her – actually registered that they had redesigned themselves again as she saw the

face, immobile, like a skull painted in silver, with the familiar jug-handles swept up behind the head. It had two slit-like red eyes, two empty black nostrils, the familiar black slit mouth and wire-mesh chin. It looked like Death itself, and if she couldn't move in that one second, it would be.

The searing heat of the plasma bolt charred the hairs on the back of her head as it just missed her, diving for cover behind some crates. She only just made it.

SHOW YOURSELF, HUMAN, came a voice like thunder.

Something was wrong here. The Cybermen in the freezer looked like a standard advance party to an invasion force, but she had never known Cybermen from so many time periods working together. And now this one was a completely new design to her, its weapons built in, its chest computer more streamlined and sleek. The whole impression of this new Cyberman was swift and powerful unstoppable death – and the skull face implied a psychological edge she had never seen before. And it had Chile, and it was waiting for her to make a move, toying with her.

STAND, it ordered, OR I SHALL DESTROY YOUR COMPANION.

Chile tried to say something, but the blood was pouring from his neck. He couldn't have long left. What the hell was it waiting for? The Cyberman didn't need to hold a hostage - it could kill Jacob and shoot her down before she even reached the door. But it didn't. It knew exactly where she was, but did nothing: if she didn't know better, she'd say it was afraid. No, if it wasn't attacking, then there was a logical reason for it. Her eyes fell on the cold weight of the Cybergun in her hand. The Cyberman didn't know it didn't work.

She had a way out.

‘Let Chile go,’ she shouted, ‘or I blow your head off.’

Chile was shaking his head. Why? The creature didn’t know the gun was dead, otherwise it wouldn’t have bothered with the hostage. What was she forgetting? The Cyberman was silent, thinking over her demands.

She saw its red eyes pulse ever so slightly. Oh God. Not thinking - it was scanning her. How could she be so stupid?

HAND WEAPON IS NON-FUNCTIONAL. TARGET DESIGNATION: VALID TARGET.

Half a second, Dorothea was already moving. She saw the Cyberman drop Chile to the floor, saw the creature’s blade thrust deep into his gut, the gun arm coming up to cover her at the same time. The door was still two metres away, too far. A second. It all happened at once. The Cyberman fired. Dorothea dived, the bolt still heading straight for her. Wolsey leapt out of nowhere, intercepting her before the bolt. She felt the Kitling’s concern, felt its anger. Then a small corner of her mind blossomed open, and the whole world went white.

As the Cyberman watched Dorothea jumping out of the room, vanishing entirely, Chile had the good sense to lie back and quietly die.

DOCUMENT TWO

Stories of immortality are always with us – the natural outcome of our fascination as a species with our own mortality, the only way to stave off the terror that comes with knowing one day we won't be here any more. Wouldn't it be nice if I never had to die, if I was immortal. From this simple, basic desire, have come such classic scenarios as Dracula, the Wandering Jew, even Peter Pan. But there are other, lesser known tales and folklore that deal with exactly the same subject, often in less complicated times being eagerly accepted as the truth.

Take, for example, the tale of the Devil Child of Northampton. This is a story I found not from the usual sources of stories passed down through the generations, but from the parish records of that fine Midlands city. The story goes that some time in the early 1600s, a child was born to a Jacob Renfield

(a merchant recently moved to the area, and destined to remain over-seas for the final years of his life) and his wife (a “dark lady of foreign climes”, presumably a black woman met on one of Renfield’s visits abroad). The name of this child is lost to history, but we do know that his mother always referred to him as Chile – a typical relaxation of child, common amongst Jamaican peoples. Hence when he became notorious, it was the “Devil Chile” tag that stuck.

Little of note seems to have happened to this Chile, until the Civil War broke out in 1642, whereupon he seems to have joined up with the Parliamentary forces against King Charles I. All goes well with the war, and Chile seems to have fought well, but without special commendation. However, when the Battle of Naseby begins (1644) Chile is mortally wounded by a Royalist musket, and is left on the field of battle to die. Which is why it caused so much consternation when he arrived back in Northampton the following day, his wounds healed without scar.

The scenes that followed are a perfect example of how word of mouth and exaggeration lead to the birth of myths. Whilst all that presumably happened is that the wound was not as fatal as first thought, the history handed down to us has it that Chile was immediately tried and found guilty of witchcraft and confederacy with the Devil. The attempts to execute him actually formed the basis of a popular comedy in the area in the 1700s.

The history books state that drowning was first attempted, but that the mysterious soldier “breathed the water like the fishes”. Next was fire, and though he “grew blisters all over”, within a day the wounds were healed and

he was fit and strong again. Sword and pike wounds scabbed over in seconds, and were vanished entirely within a matter of hours, while the strongest poisons were “as the water of life” to him. Hanging, beatings, starving, shooting, all proved similarly ineffective. In the end, the town was forced to accede defeat, and settled instead to banish Chile from the city for life – however long that would be for one in league with the Devil.

What happened to him after he left Northampton we can only imagine, but his story is typical of the wider . . .

An extract from

The Wandering Jew and the Devil (Methuen, 1998.)

By Benjamin Heyworth

EIGHT

Little Sarfield: 24. November, 2003

08:23

Sophie lay as still as she could on the floor, trying to ignore the throbbing pain in her legs. Her wheelchair was lying on its side behind her, its wheel still spinning with the force of the explosion that had upended it. Lars was nowhere to be seen, nor the Doctor. He was unconscious. The sergeant was little more than a mass of blood half buried under a pile of broken brick and shattered glass. He let out a gasp, his last breath escaping. Sophie had never seen anyone die before.

The giant stood in the smoking ruin of the front wall, its skull turning this way and that as it surveyed the damage it had caused.

WHERE IS THE DOCTOR? it boomed.

Sophie hardly dared to breathe.

The creature was huge, a demon escaped from the very pit of hell. Its thick skin glistened silver, metallic. A robot? It face was a frozen glaring skull, two thin red eyes burning around the room. There was nothing human about that face. Its right arm was crooked awkwardly, the wrist trailing slowly around the room. From her cramped vantage point, Sophie noticed a thin metal tube pointing out of the metal of the wrist. Some kind of weapon then, probably the one that had reduced her front wall to rubble. Probably what had killed the sergeant.

What the hell was it?

‘I’m here,’ she heard the little man say, stood in the doorway to the kitchen. Somehow, his diminutive figure didn’t look ridiculous sizing up to the massive bulk of the creature. The fire in his eyes matched the creature’s. Sophie noticed his eyes flick downward, and tried to see what he had seen. All she could see was the sergeant’s bag, resting on the floor. ‘What do you want?’

Without any other movement, the creature fired.

Sophie didn’t see the bolt, only felt the searing heat and was blinded by the fire as it flew over head. It flew too fast to see. But not as fast as the Doctor.

Even before he had finished speaking, the Doctor was moving: diving forward, falling to the floor, reaching out with dextrous fingers. As he hit the rubble strewn floor, he rolled, narrowly avoiding a second bolt that melted the concrete floor. When he leapt back to his feet, he had the sergeant’s small

black bag in his hands. But the creature was just as fast.

Its gun arm swung up quick and smooth, trained on the little man. Nothing could stop the giant's shot. The Doctor flinched, and held the bag out in front of him like a shield: a ridiculous idea - the creature had him clean in its sights. He was a dead man.

HAND GUN: DEACTIVATED. DOCTOR TARGET HAS THE STOLEN DEVICE. DEVICE IS NOT TO BE DAMAGED.

There was no reason for the creature not to shoot, but it didn't. Its gun lowered, and it began to pace forwards. It was slow, but Sophie knew that it was also unstoppable. The Doctor didn't wait to find out, instead turning and bolting out the back way. The creature paced after him.

HUMAN TARGET DESIGNATION: **DANGEROUS** TO BE ELIMINATED.

As it passed by Sophie, its gun arm trained itself to her chest, ready to fire. For a few brief seconds, she was staring down the barrel into the dark shadows inside. If it chose to fire, she'd see the bolt as it flew down the shaft and hit her. She could see what it had done to her house: what would it do to her?

The whole world was nothing but that giant black hole.

Stevie, I'll always love you.

HUMAN TARGET DESIGNATION: **DANGEROUS** NO LONGER IN RANGE. DOCTOR TARGET HAS PRIORITY.

Then the gun passed by, taking the creature with it. It disappeared into

the kitchen, and then there was a loud crash. Then, nothing. Sophie thanked the Lord that she was still alive, that the creature was gone. She hoped.

To be safe, she waited for a few minutes, not making a sound. The nagging pain in her legs tried to make her betray herself, whispering that her pain killers were only scant feet away, and that she just had to move and get them for the pain to be gone. But she waited until she could be sure the creature was gone. She didn't want to meet that thing again as long as she lived.

A second later, and Dorothea found herself face down in the mud, outside the perimeter fence. She could feel the cold weight of the dead Cybergun beneath her, being pressed slowly into the mud by her body weight. Wolsey crept up cautiously, nudging the side of her face. He wasn't happy, she knew, wanted her well away from here, from the Cyberman. But was well away from here away from them? How many more of them might there be, and how long before they activated the rest of the advance party? And then there was Chile. This was all getting too complicated.

It had seemed like such a simple plan when she'd come up with it. In, out, back to HQ before Bambera got back, ready to hear her complain again how much a couple of hints would have helped. Now the Cybermen were involved, and the Doctor was here, and it looked like she had a full scale invasion on her hands. And Chile had been sliced clean through, was still in there. She'd seen him survive worse, but she knew it would be at least

another half-hour before he was in any state to move. And that was half an hour lying in that room, praying the Cyberman didn't realise its mistake.

She could tell Wolsey wanted her away from here, feel his concern. She'd had no choice but to jump, but Wolsey knew what it did to her, how the virus took its strength from her, tried to reassert itself with every fragment of it she used, every inch of adrenaline burnt up. He knew she would want a few moments away from the heat of the battle, to calm herself, reassert her will over the virus, take back her body, her mind. He knew she shouldn't go back to the Manor.

And then there was the Doctor to consider. He still wasn't entirely on the ball, only just back from the dead. He was trying to recuperate, gather himself back together, take stock of what had happened. He wouldn't be expecting trouble so soon, probably didn't even know the Cybermen were here. He would have to be warned, if he was going to do anything to stop them, perhaps even call UNIT in.

So it was decided. Chile was a big boy, he could take care of himself. The Doctor would need to be warned. Dorothea would need to rest. There was really only one thing she could do.

And so it was that Wolsey looked after Dorothea, head cocked, as she stalked down the hill, heading back to the Manor, back to the Cyberman. If he had been human, like his Sibling, he probably would have shook his head in resignation. As it was, he merely pulled himself back to his feet and trotted back down the hill, after his Sister, unafraid.

The Doctor ran, faster than he had ever ran before in his lives, the leather bag clutched to his chest. Whatever was in it was extremely light, but the Cyberman hadn't wanted to destroy it, so it had to be important. Anything that stopped the Cybermen killing was always important.

He knew he could outrun the Cyberman – speed was not their strong point with all that heavy machinery crammed into the giant figure – but the second he stopped, the second he tired, it would find him. They never tired, they never stopped, they never gave up. He was rather surprised to discover how quickly he *was* tiring, how soon his lungs had started to burn, until he realised he was expecting something else to give him strength. He was no longer running with the strength of a Cheetah, chasing his prey on the wind. He was the Doctor, plain and simple – well, relatively plain and simple – and running just wasn't his thing. Now if he could just remember what his thing was, everything would work out fine.

His talk with Chile had helped, although he suspected there was something the caretaker had been holding back, some pet theory perhaps. But most of it was there. He was the Doctor, he made things better. He fought things like the Cybermen and he won, mostly. But the thing that worried him was the gaps. There was a sizeable chunk of his memories missing: he remembered Jötunson, remembered the cage, the beast taking him over, remembered dying. Then there was just the cellar and waking back to the world. Nothing in between. But there had to be something, something before all the running and chasing and Cybermen. Something had brought him back,

somehow, but neither he nor Chile nor Dorothea could tell him what it was, how it happened. But somebody, somewhere knew. They had to.

The Doctor tried to control his temperature, ease the fatigue racking his body, but he found that control was a lot easier with the virus to help. As it was, he would have to stop soon. It was now or never to try his plan.

Stopping carefully in one spot, the Doctor clutched the bag to his chest. If he did take too long, at least the Cyberman wouldn't shoot him down from behind. He hoped. Carefully, his eyes on the ground behind him, the Doctor started to walk backwards, each foot landing in a precisely chosen spot. He watched his feet fall as he ran, and now he matched his path exactly, heading backwards towards a tall overhanging tree in somebody's garden. Something like this would have been child's play, once. Now the jump up to the branch looked like a thousand miles. Hooking the bag into the crook of his elbow, the Doctor stretched out with his arms, tensed the muscles in his legs, and leapt.

He nearly didn't make it. His fingers only just caught the rough bark, and he found himself trying to dig his fingernails into the branch, his legs wildly peddling in the air. He felt his hat slipping from his head, the bag tapping him in the face, and he knew he was going to fall. He didn't even know what had possessed him to try such a stupid trick. One thing was sure – his days in the circus were definitely over. Then, just as he was sure he was going to drop neatly into the Cyberman's path, he managed to claw his way up onto the tree branch.

Allowing himself just one second to catch his breath, and jam his hat firmly onto his head, he looked around him. No time for self-congratulation,

unless he wanted to get caught like a cat stuck in a tree. He grasped the bag firmly to his chest, he went down on all fours and started to crawl along the length of the branch. It bent alarmingly, creaking like an old woman, but held until he reached the end of it, hanging over the cottages fence, into the back garden. The Doctor looked down at the drop. Ten feet, but it looked more like a hundred.

Carefully lowering himself, grabbing hold of the branch and letting his feet swing in the air, the Doctor swung in the air. Then he dropped.

He landed in a heap on the ground, the bag slipping from its hold and landed on the grass by his head. He sat staring at it, wishing he had the time to open it. But the Cyberman would be by any second, and it wouldn't take long for it to realise he hadn't vanished into thin air. Gathering himself to his feet, picking up the bag and his hat, the Doctor scurried down to the end of the garden. When he reached the garden gate, he let it off the latch and quickly disappeared into the maze of alleys behind the houses.

Not a second to soon. Immediately as the gate swung shut, the Cyberman came striding around the corner, eyes to the ground, gun arm trained in front of him. The creature looked strangely at home pacing through the quiet streets of the village, the morning sun glinting off its smooth metal body, its demon eyes glowing like the pits of hell. No-one saw it as it walked down the road, it saw them and avoided them long before they got close. Soon it wouldn't matter. Soon the time would come to cleanse the area for the landing party.

INFRARED TRAIL OBSCURED, the Cyberman's central processor told

it. BEGINNING SCAN.

The Cyberman stood stock still in the middle of the pavement, it's head turning this way and that. Its gaze was a beacon of light that none could hide from. No matter that the Doctor had found some way to obscure his infrared trail – he would have left some other clue, some trail to his destination. No-one escaped the Cybermen, not forever. It stood there a full five seconds, its CPU clicking through every scan in its databanks. To no avail.

DOCTOR TARGET NO LONGER IN AREA. ACCESSING CENTRAL DATABANKS.

And deep inside the Cyberman's CPU, there was a hum of activity. It sent out panicked messages to all other units for some hint of where the Doctor had gone, where he could be. It scanned the available area again, its gaze falling on an overhanging branch some twenty feet back. The idea of checking the infrared tracks for a double trail – a sure sign of backtracking – was just about to occur it, the next logical step being to scan the branch for a trace of the Doctor, when a message came back from the central CPU.

ARCHIVE FROM LIEUTENANT. FOOTAGE SHOWING.

And as the Cyberman stood, it saw through the Lieutenant's eyes as a human female/hybrid was cornered in a dark room. It felt the Lieutenant raise its gun arm, fire – the only logical choice of action, under the circumstances – and watched impassively as the female vanished from the line of fire. It received the downloaded information from the Lieutenant's scan and discovered that the human female/hybrid had teleported clean out of the area, with the assistance of a feline male/hybrid.

POSSIBILITY OF DOCTOR TARGET POSSESSING SIMILAR ABILITY: 74%

The Cyberman's CPU considered this new information carefully. Teleportation would be a useful ability for the Cyberarmy to possess – this human female should be made a priority capture target, and prepared for conversion. It transmitted the suggestion to the Lieutenant, who agreed – of course – and transmitted the orders into the Central Databanks. However, the *Ven Maqu Is* programme still held chief priority: the Doctor must be found.

SCAN COMPLETE, the CPU announced. PROBABILITY OF DOCTOR TARGET BACKTRACKING: 99.9%

And with it's mystery solved, the Cyberman turned and paced steadily, unwaveringly back down the track. But there was no triumph in its walk, no pride in solving such a complicated problem. There was just the cold impassive mask of its face, and the whirr or complex machinery. The Doctor had brought himself seconds, but nothing more. Nothing stopped the Cybermen.

Chile lay on the floor and did his best to look dead. It wasn't difficult. His neck had knit itself back together, but he had at least two pints of blood down his front. His skin was pale and cool, his neck and chest seeming burning hot as they healed themselves. He felt weak, waiting for his blood supply to build itself back to normal, and he couldn't have moved if he wanted to. All in all, he was doing a good impression of a man killed by the sword. It

was just a shame for the Cyberman he hadn't gone the whole hog and died.

Hearing a noise outside – the heavy *clunk clunk* of metal footsteps – Chile lay back, let his eyes go glassy, and held his breath.

A second later and the Cyberman strode in, carrying a crate roughly the size of a washing machine as if it were made out of paper. It set it down with a crash in the centre of a pile of equipment which was starting to grow to roughly the same height as the Cyberman's chest. It had been doing this ever since Dorothea had jumped out – wandering all over the Manor, then coming back with some new piece of fantastic machinery, which it dumped onto the heap as if it were last weeks newspapers. Chile had no idea what it could be doing – stockpiling for the creatures in the freezer, perhaps? – but he prayed it would keep it busy until he was strong enough to move.

However, it suddenly seemed like a vain hope. Normally, once it had deposited its burden, the creature immediately turned and went for another. This time, it was merely stood as if dead, glowing red eyes on the pile before it. Chile had no idea what it was doing, but he could feel his lungs starting to burn with the effort of keeping his breath in. He would have to breathe soon, or risk fainting. But still the creature did nothing.

Then, in one crisp movement, it thrust its fist into its stomach, the glimmering metal parting like water to allow it inside. When the fist withdrew, it was holding a small flat black dome. With a single digit, it pushed an invisible switch, and a small red light started to flash in the heart of the device. Chile had no trouble guessing what it could be. The Cyberman placed in calmly down in the centre of the pile, and strode unhurried from the room. Chile gave

it a few seconds, then gulped for air that couldn't have tasted any sweeter.

Then he paused. The heavy *clunk-clank* of the Cyberman's footsteps had stopped. He listened carefully, straining his ears to hear the slightest sound. He could hear the bomb flashing almost inaudible to itself, but he couldn't hear the Cyberman. Not until the heavy *clunk-clank* started again. Coming back into the room.

Before he could even try to hold his breath again, Chile found himself hauled up to his feet, his face thrust into the black mask of the Cyberman's. He expected to feel the dank rasp of the creature's breath on his face, but there was nothing. The creature wasn't breathing. Too weak to resist, Chile closed his eyes, anticipating the ice numb of the blade, or the burning heat of the plasma rifle. Neither came. With a slight click, a speaker in the creature's throat came to life, and it thundered calmly at him.

YOU ARE NOT DEAD.

There was no surprise in the creature's voice, merely a cold statement of fact. Chile started to realise he was in over his head. He tried to speak, but merely croaked. His mind was on the bomb in the corner: would the creature forget it? Would he survive it, in his weakened state?

The creature shook him casually with one hand. He felt his brain bounce off the walls of his skull. It wanted to slide into darkness, let it all melt away. He fought to keep control.

YOU ARE NOT DEAD. WHY?

'You can't kill me,' Chile croaked, feeling his throat tear again, hoping it was true. 'No-one can.'

There was a pause. Chile waited for the explosion, for the pain and the heat. He knew what it would feel like – he'd lived through them before.

YOU WILL BE LIKE US, the Creature said, and threw Chile over its shoulder like a sack of grain.

Without hurrying, it had them out of the room and at the other end of the corridor by the time the explosion reduced the room to ash.

Sergeant Murphy held his foot to the floor and tried not to think about how many traffic violations he was notching up. He tried not to think about a lot of things. He tried not to think about the pain in his back, half a million shards of glass slowly worming their way into his flesh. He tried not to think about Lars and how he had left them to the creature, speeding off in his car whilst they lay in the wreckage of Sophie's once picturesque house. He tried not to think about what Mathew Clark would say about the Sergeant hot-wiring his car and driving it off so recklessly. And he tried not to think about how much the woman beside him was starting to annoy him.

It had started as soon as he had come round after the explosion. The silver giant he'd seen in the street was gone, and so was most of the front wall. He'd felt the fire in his back, wanted nothing more than to curl up and die in a corner, but as soon as she'd realised he was alive – not dead, as she'd thought – she'd started screaming at him. What the hell was going on, how were they going to get out of there, what the hell was that thing? He'd tried to explain calmly that he hadn't got any more clue than her, but she just wouldn't

accept it. Perk of the uniform – everyone thought you knew everything.

‘I can’t believe the Doctor just abandoned us like that,’ Sophie Wagner snapped beside him, distracting him yet again as he tried to take another corner at ninety.

As far as Murphy could see, the Doctor had saved them both. He’d led the creature away on a lead, leaving them to get out while they could. That was the Doctor’s way – diving in to save the little people, not caring about himself. Usually cause it was his fault the little people were in trouble, but at least he meant well. Not that he was going to tell Sophie that – he’d been brought up not to answer back to people in her condition. Sometimes, though . . .

‘Where’re we going?’ Sophie asked, tongue lashing the Sergeant’s wounds.

He tried to stay calm. Tried not to think how heavy she’d been as he’d lugged her out to the car, her wheelchair mangled beyond recognition. Tried not to think about how much damage the strain had done to his back, never good at the best of times, still in shock from the explosion. He tried to remind herself it was only shock making her like this – probably making him like this too, to be honest – that she was normally a lovely person. She was just tired and scared and looking for answers. But it didn’t help.

‘I want to get you to safety, then I’ll –’

‘No,’ she snapped, turning on him with pointed finger. ‘I want you to take me to Stevie. He’ll look after me.’

‘I don’t know where he is, Sophie,’ the Sergeant said, trying to stay

calm. ‘I’ll find him once –’

‘No. Take me to him.’

And that was quite enough. It had been an awful day, with first one person then another barking orders at him, with silver supermen firing missile launchers at him, and he’d just had enough. This kind of thing wasn’t in his job description. He turned his head to bark something at her, God alone knew what, took his eyes off the road for just one second. Before a word left his lips, Sophie was screaming: shrill and piercing, it felt like it would make the Murphy’s ears bleed.

He looked back to the road, and narrowly avoided ploughing into the Doctor as he bolted out in front of them.

He slammed on the brakes, the car skidding, just as the Doctor turned, trying to stop himself. For a moment, it looked like he would go straight through the windscreen, imbed himself in the radiator. Then with a twist – a kind of manoeuvre that it hurt his mind to think about later – he managed to spin himself out of the path of the car, coming to a halt by the passenger side door as the car screeched to a standstill. The smell of burning rubber was in the air as the Doctor casually pulled open the back door and climbed in, still clutching – the Sergeant noticed – Lars’ brown leather bag.

‘Good morning, Sergeant,’ the Doctor said cheerfully, as if he hadn’t just been one second from an early grave. ‘Any chance of a lift?’

‘Where to?’ the Sergeant asked, still shaken.

‘Away from that, very fast,’ the Doctor said, pointing back the way he had come. The sergeant followed the finger, and saw a massive silver shape

moving at speed towards the car.

‘Hold on,’ the Sergeant said, throwing the car into gear and pushing the accelerator down hard.

As the Cyberman burst out of the alleyway, it was just in time to see the car squealing off down the road, heading up and out of the valley. It trained its gun arm on the vehicle, but did nothing but stand and watch. Then, with no sign of anger or disappointment, it steadily started to jog in the footsteps of the car. Eventually, it would catch them. Eventually.

NINE

Little Sarfield: 24. November, 2003

08:56

Lars stood on the rim of the valley, the House and the Manor on the opposite rim, the village far below him, binoculars to his eyes, searching. He could expect the troops within half-an-hour, forty-five minutes at the most. They were well trained, they knew what to expect. They could handle the Cyberman, possibly even bring it down without too much damage. Of course it was possible that by the time they got here, everyone in the village would be dead. Omelettes and eggs, he thought. Omelettes and eggs.

Chile tested his muscles as he watched numerous corridors and

staircases vanishing behind him. Nothing. His strength was coming back, but slowly, so slowly. And even if it came back to peak performance in the next five seconds, he'd be no match for the silver giant casually carrying every stone of him over one shoulder. It held him firm with one hand, striding casually along, eyes firmly on its destination, not even registering its cargo. Any door that stood in its way was soon a pile of matchwood on the ground. Things didn't look good.

'Where are you taking me?' he tried to ask, the words just a breeze in a forest. He would have to keep quiet – each attempt meant another few precious minutes before he was fully healed. And, besides, the Cyberman refused to answer him. It just kept going along at that unstoppable pace.

As far as Chile could tell from his strange vantage point, the Cyberman was taking him up to the attic. At least, they'd gone up three flights so far, and it didn't seem to be slowing. There could only be an attic left. Room after room went by, Chile straining to see in – every now and then catching a hint of a carefully concealed corpse. The Cyberman was taking no chances that the casual observer might spot something wrong – what were they afraid of? When the invasion force landed, no-one would care for a few out of the way scientists. How long did they have, he wondered. How could he make it tell him, when it seemed content to remain silent as the grave. Hadn't it ever seen a war movie? Right about now it should be boasting about its plan, giving them a chance to escape.

The creature stopped dead, its head turning left, then right. Perhaps this was it.

Without a second's warning, the Cyberman suddenly leapt into the air, its free hand a fist leading the way. The silver fist struck the ceiling, didn't stop, pushed through in a shower of splinters and plaster. Chile felt the dust catch in his throat, forcing him to cough, rip his tortured neck open again. The creature paid him no heed, first its head, then Chile, then the rest of its massive silver frame swallowed by the hole in the ceiling. Chile shut his eyes, tried to keep the dust away, keep himself from coughing blood.

When he opened his eyes, all was darkness. He could see light pouring through the hole in the floor, illuminating the dust that danced and wheeled in the narrow space, but all else was black. He could feel the roof close in around him, walls not to far away, and he could feel the Cyberman starting to stoop. The attic, then: his guess had been right. But why? What was there up here?

Then he sensed the other creature in the room.

He couldn't see it, all he could see was the Cyberman's back and the floor, its eyes on the attic's other occupant. But he knew it was there: it didn't breath, it didn't speak, but it exuded *presence*. And the Cyberman was taking him to meet it. Somehow, he didn't think it would be for cocoa and biscuits. The Cyberman stood stock still, Chile draped over one shoulder, for at least a second, not a word passing between it and the unseen creature. But Chile guessed they were communicating. He wished he could hear what they were saying.

Then, suddenly, he found himself lifted from the shoulder, and turned to face the machine.

It sat hunched over in the corner, scowling down at him. It looked uncannily like a giant silver Gorilla, small silver skull set into broad shoulders, atop a huge curved metal belly. It had stick-thin silver arms coming out from behind its head, that ended in crude three-fingered pincers that danced and snapped in the air around him. They looked like they couldn't take the strain of a good sized mouse, but if the Cyberman's grip was anything to go by, they could probably lift Chile as easy as look at him. There were three more pincers at intervals around the creature's back, holding it firmly to the wall, grasping on to a frayed power line that snaked and twined there.

Most disturbing of all, though, were the two glowing red eyes, the thin slit mouth, the dark nostrils, and the way they mirrored the Death's head of the Cyberman. They were obviously peas from the same pod. Chile wondered almost casually what the creature in front of him was, if the Cyberman was so obviously the foot soldier. He wouldn't have to wait long to find out.

SUBJECT IDENTIFIED: MALE HUMAN SPECIAL, the Forge's CPU told the Cyberman. CONVERSION BEGINNING.

Without a word, the Cyberman behind him turned and headed back to the makeshift entrance. Was it just going to leave him here to bandy insults with the Gorilla? Or . . .

The Forge's pincer arms shot out, fast as vipers, clutched Chile in an iron grip. He tried to struggle out, but the creature's strength, his own weakness, it was doomed to fail. For a moment, he held the creature's blank stare, defiant. Then he had to look away as he saw a thing line of brilliant light split its bulbous stomach in two. Squinting, Chile could just make out the

shape of the Gorilla's stomach opening out to reveal a hollow space within. A space roughly the size of a seven-foot tall giant, bent over in the foetal position.

YOU WILL BE LIKE US, the Forge's soft, reedy voice whispered, before the spindly arms thrust the unresisting Chile into its stomach.

The last thing Chile saw was the thin crack of daylight sealing itself shut as the Forge's stomach closed around him.

'Where are we going?' Sophie asked, for the third time. She knew it must be annoying - Christ she could hear it herself, that thin, whining edge to her voice. The cutting tone of a spoilt child. But she wasn't spoilt: she was terrified and alone, and she wanted her Stevie back. Now. 'Please.'

'We're going up to the Manor,' the Doctor said softly from behind her, his Scot's burr taking the edge from her panic. 'From what I can gather, that's where things seem to be concentrated.'

'Is that where Stevie is?' she could see the Sergeant's mouth become a firm, flat line. Didn't he have anyone to worry about?

'It's the last place anyone saw him,' the Doctor whispered softly. 'If he's anywhere, he'll be there.'

Sophie tried to take comfort from that, tried as hard as she could to imagine Stevie waiting for her, a brilliant white smile shining out. Imagine him sweeping her up in his arms, carrying her back to their home, laying her down

gently. But their home was a wreck. The creature had seen to that. And she couldn't help hearing the Doctor say 'If he's anywhere,' and knowing what that could mean.

'It's still following,' the Sergeant said, his eyes firmly on the rear-view mirror. He should keep his eyes on the road, the speed he was going at. But she wouldn't tell him: she knew what response she'd get.

'Hmm,' was all the Doctor said, twisting around in his seat to get a better view.

Sophie tried to look too, but all she could see was a vague glint of silver back down the road. It was hard to equate that tiny speck with the hulking creature that had turned her front room, her life, upside down with such impassive power, hard to worry about that when Stevie was only moments away in her memory. And yet the thought did flash into her head, watching that speck move closer and closer: what would happen when it caught them? And how would she run with no chair to help her?

'Let's have a look at what they find so important, shall we?' the Doctor said, reaching for the leather satchel by his feet. The Sergeant jerked round, pulling the wheel and nearly running them all into the side of the road.

'Sergeant!' Sophie screamed, and instantly regretted it.

'Don't worry,' he snapped back instantly, eyes on the road, as if nothing had happened. 'I know what I'm doing.'

'Something wrong, Sergeant?' the Doctor asked softly.

'I was given very clear instructions about that bag, Doctor. They didn't include anyone but Lars opening it.'

‘No,’ said the Doctor.

‘The consequences would be grave, was what was said,’

‘I’m sure.’

‘Which leads me to conclude that there’s something very important in there.’

‘Indeed,’ agreed the Doctor, his fingers stroking the bag softly, like a lover.

The Sergeant sighed. Sophie just knew he wasn’t going to let the Doctor do what he needed. No matter what was in that satchel, no matter how immediate the danger, no matter how close that creature was on their heels. Even when that satchel might contain the only chance they had.

‘I’ve known Lars for a long time, Doctor,’ the Sergeant said, jaw set. ‘He’s been a good friend all that time. You, Doctor, have only ever brought pain and suffering to the people of this village.’

‘I’d rather we didn’t talk about that,’ the Doctor said, adding under his breath, so Sophie could only just catch it: ‘It hasn’t happened yet.’

‘And today, Lars treated me like the lowest squadie at the bottom of a pile of scum,’ the Sergeant continued. ‘Open the bag.’

‘Thank you, Sergeant,’ the Doctor said, and set to work on the bag.

First he tried to snap the plastic threads with his fingers - they only cut his hands. Digging into his coat pockets, he started searching for something. Something that remained elusive until he took his hat from his head and pulled it from inside: a small Swiss Army Pocket Knife. Using a carefully selected blade, he slit the threads and cracked open the catch. As the bag

opened, Sophie half expected to see light flood out from within. Either that, or a solitary moth to fly drunkenly out. Neither did. The Doctor craned over the bag and peered inside. His face crumpled like an old newspaper, his brow practically touching his bottom lip.

‘What is it?’ Sophie asked.

‘Doctor?’ echoed the Sergeant.

‘Nothing,’ the Doctor replied. ‘I just wish I’d opened it before I’d started running round the village.’

And reaching in with his thumb and forefinger, the Doctor pulled out a tiny square of plastic, dotted with minute networks of silver threads.

‘What is it?’ Sophie asked again.

‘Some kind of circuit,’ the Doctor said, fumbling again in his pockets and pulling out a jeweller’s eyeglass. Looking through the lens, he scrutinised the microchip. ‘A Cyber control circuit.’

‘A what?’ growled the Sergeant.

‘One of the most basic building blocks of that creature behind us,’ Sophie’s eyes immediately went to the silver dot behind them. ‘Normally, you’d have to hack through a fair amount of Cyberman to get to these. This one isn’t damaged at all: it looks brand new. Possibly our friend back there. Ah!’

‘Doctor,’ said Sophie.

‘What is it?’ the Sergeant asked, straining to see and keep the car moving at the same time.

‘It’s a relay link,’ the Doctor said, squinting into the eyeglass. ‘It keeps them in touch with the CyberController.’

‘Doctor,’ said Sophie.

‘Who?’

‘The leader. The one who tells the Cybermen like that one what to do. It’s their link across the vast distances of space. If this belongs to that Cyberman, then its totally alone. It can’t contact the rest of the invasion fleet.’

‘Invasion?’

‘Without a doubt, Sergeant. It’s what they do: contact, conquer, convert.’

‘Doctor!’ said Sophie, insistently.

‘Sophie?’

‘The thing following us,’ she said, eyes on the road behind. ‘I think it’s stopped.’

They all flew forward as the Sergeant slammed the car to a halt, spinning it slightly, so that now Sophie could stare straight down into the valley and see the small speck of silver, still, unmoving. The Doctor’s head appeared in between the two seats, his eyes fixed on the creature, his face dark. Sophie could almost believe he could see it in hawk-like clarity. She heard him breathe next to her ear - slightly too slow to be normal. The Sergeant kept the engine ticking over, ready to move again if need be.

‘What’s it doing?’ Sophie asked.

‘I don’t know,’ the Doctor admitted.

‘It’s moving,’ the Sergeant said.

Sophie looked again and could see that it was. But not up towards them: off at a tangent, to one side. Heading for the opposite wall of the valley to them. The dot barely seemed to be moving from this distance, but down there Sophie could imagine it striding through the narrow streets at pace, leaving even the fastest runners far behind, catching up with even the most hasty retreat. Looking up at the other wall of the valley, Sophie could just see what it was making for: snaking down towards the village on the main road to Greater Sarfield was a line of green vehicles.

‘What are they?’ Sophie asked.

‘My guess, the army,’ the Sergeant said, sounding almost relieved. ‘Lars said he’d called them in.’

The Doctor’s voice was stone, cutting through their relief with a cold edge:

‘How quickly can you get me down there?’

Sophie felt her heart fall, even as she saw the Sergeant spin round in his seat. She knew then that she’d never see Stevie again.

‘Are you mad? Let them deal -’

‘Sergeant Murphy,’ the Doctor interrupted, firmly, ‘Unless you get me down there before that Cyberman reaches them, every one of those soldiers will die. Do you understand?’

There was no arguing. Wheels squealed, and the car threw itself back down the hill. Back towards the monster.

The first thing Chile felt was the darkness - the crushing true black darkness of the nights of his childhood. Except their was no camp-fire to huddle round for warmth, no rabbit and thyme to fill his empty belly. He tried not to think about bellies. The next thing he felt was the hiss of water flooding into his tiny prison, within seconds up around his neck, higher. He tried holding his breath, clenching his entire face shut, but to no avail. In the end he had to breath in. He hoped it wouldn't matter: hoped that whatever demon keeping him alive was still looking favourably on him. The next thing he felt was surprise: surprise to find that he could breath the water as easily as the air, without the angry burn he usually associated with drowning.

The next thing he felt was the slight pin-prick of an injection, then an all prevailing sense of ease.

He didn't panic as he felt the bright green line burn up and down his body, scanning him inside and out. He didn't panic as he swam in the water, breathing it, feeling it in every pore of his body. He didn't panic as he heard the quiet digital babble begin, soft and lulling like a mother singing to her child. He didn't even panic as he began to feel other things in the water with him - small tube-like arms, spindly fingers brushing out to him. They felt like a tender caress from a loved one, the reassuring touch of a parent.

STAGE ONE CONVERSION BEGINNING, the Forge told itself.

He didn't even panic when he felt the water starting to thrash about around him - the babble and the caresses ceasing abruptly, light burning his face again. He didn't panic as a shrill screeching started to fill the narrow

chamber, even as he felt something new and sharp slice across his forearm. Then he felt fur - damp, sticky, clotted fur - brush against his face, and adrenaline licked in, panic following soon behind.

IMPURITY DETECTED. SUBJECT: UNSUITABLE. CONVERSION ABANDONED.

Just a second later, he saw the stomach begin to split open from the inside, the light falling on a speeding black shape as it darted out, on two thinner black shapes as they reached in and dragged him out.

As the adrenaline and the panic started to take the edge off the drugs, Chile found himself lying on the attic floor in a pool of thick, gelatinous liquid, coughing up more of the stuff from the very pit of his lungs. Shaking himself vigorously by Chile's head, trying to throw more of the gunk away from his matted and slimy fur, was Wolsey. Turning his head slightly, Chile could see Dorothea behind him, jamming the crack in the Gorilla's belly open with the silver Cybergun. Her eyes were covered by the shades, but he knew she was looking at him.

MALFUNCTION, the Forge told itself. ATTEMPTING TO CLOSE WOMB.

Chile coughed, and another great glob of jelly hit the dusty floor.

'What did you do?' he choked out.

'Same old trick,' hissed Dorothea through gritted teeth. 'Sent Wolsey in to get you. Once it finds him in there, it assumes it's part of you. Bingo, you're no longer good enough to be one of them.'

With a final grunt, Dorothea pushed back and flew away from the Gorilla's stomach, just as the pincer fingers made a grab at where she'd been. She rolled as she fell, and was on her feet even before the doors had snapped shut around the gun. As Wolsey scurried away to the hole in the floor - leaving a trail of sticky paw-prints in the dust - Dorothea was grabbing Chile, helping him to his feet, urging him to run.

'What's the hurry,' Chile complained hoarsely. 'I thought the gun didn't work.'

'It works,' Dorothea said, dragging him to the hole. 'You just need to be a Cyberman to make it fire. But any old Broadsword can get it to overload.'

And as they dropped through the hole in the floor, the gun exploded, showering the corridor with bits of plaster, tiles, dust and a large proportion of the Forge. As Dorothea's head lifted up again, all she could see was Wolsey at the other end of the corridor. The kitling was covered with slime, and most of the dust loosened by the explosion had stuck to his fur. He looked at her with eyes full of disgust, and she could feel how evil the mixture felt against his fur. Later on, she'd feel how bad it felt against his tongue, too.

'What about the Cyberman?' Chile groaned beside her.

'Gone,' she answered. 'Head down to the village a few minutes ago. Looks like something pretty big's happening without us again.'

'Our mutual friend?' Chile asked, meaning the Doctor.

'Got to be,' Dorothea replied.

Somehow, she didn't think it was a good day to be a Cyberman.

ADDITIONAL TARGETS LOCATED, the Cyberman had told itself. SCANNING.

It had seen the four trucks the moment they'd crested the horizon, immediately recognised them as military. That put them down as immediate priority number one: past experience had proven that if the *Ven Maqu Is* was allowed to ally himself with the military, then defeat soon followed. Their target priority became even higher when the scan revealed three things: there were two hundred of them, all human targets; they were carrying one hundred CyberWeapons, all active; the target designated HUMAN TARGET **DANGEROUS** was riding with them, in the lead vehicle. Such information had to be immediately passed on to the CyberLieutenant immediately.

INTERCEPT, the response came almost instantaneously. TARGET VOLUME 15% TOO HIGH FOR ONE UNIT. AWAIT ARRIVAL OF CYBERLIEUTENANT.

And so the Cyberman abandoned its primary course of action, turning off instead to head down on an intercept course with the military units. It stopped for nothing, and its only response when it received the final few moments of the Forge's life via its video-feed link was to contact its Lieutenant again, with the message:

CYBERFORGE OFF LINE. OBTAIN SUITABLE SUBJECT FOR REPLACEMENT.

And without pausing, it kept on, crashing through the countryside.

TEN

Little Sarfield: 24. November, 2003

09:39

‘Shouldn’t we follow it?’ Chile asked, creeping along behind Dorothea as they wormed their way into the heart of the Manor.

‘I think whatever’s going on in the village is just a diversion. This seems to be the centre of its operations,’ adding over her shoulder: ‘Don’t worry. He can look after himself.’

Don’t I know it, Chile thought, but said nothing.

‘Something’s wrong,’ Dorothea said firmly, eyes flicking this way and that. Wolsey had gone on ahead, and Chile knew she was using his eyes as much as hers.

‘Is it still here?’ a thrill of fear: a new feeling.

She shook her head, giving nothing away. Then:

‘I don’t get why they destroyed the ice-pops. Why blow up your own invasion force?’

‘Unless it wasn’t an invasion force.’

‘What else?’

‘I don’t know. A liability.’

‘That would make sense. And why so many from different time periods?’

‘And why kill everyone here? Why not -’ a brief flash of calm darkness, water in his lungs. ‘Why not convert them. With everyone who was here, they’d have an army by now.’

Dorothea shook her head again.

‘Not their way. They get very picky over who gets to join them. Got to be a perfect physical specimen.’

‘I thought they just replaced all the body parts,’ Chile said, trying not to think too hard about it.

‘Not replace,’ Dorothea corrected: ‘Augment. That’s why they chose you. If they replaced every bit of your body, they’d lose what it was that made you special.’

‘I’m touched.’

‘Their Forges inject chemicals and machinery into the living tissue, and they slowly turn the muscles into machines. They boost performance by 200%, sometimes 300%. If you were Linford Christie to start with, now you

could run like a Cheetah. But if you could barely hobble to the shops before, then you'd just be able to run, after.'

'You know a lot about it,' Chile said softly, wanting to put a hand on her shoulder, but not doing.

'I've seen it happen to some good friends,' she said, eyes far away.

Chile saw her then, silhouetted against the light at the end of the corridor, and decided he didn't want to know any more. And that she wouldn't want to tell him if he did.

'So everyone here was unsuitable?' he asked, thinking of all the bodies they'd seen so far, the tip of the iceberg.

'Anyone who's smoked more than 5 cigarettes in the past 48 hours is automatically out,' she said, reeling off the list from memory. 'Anyone who happens to have a cold or something. Anyone who's not of at least above average fitness and intelligence. Some of them would have had diseases that they haven't even noticed yet: cancer, Parkinson's, asthma. But still . . .'

'You would've expected at least one or two to make it past the entrance exam.'

'Unless they were somehow a threat to the Cybermen.'

'If perhaps they'd made intimate studies of them - perhaps had four or five specimens locked in a freezer, and God knows how much equipment lying around.'

'Then they'd have to be killed, yeah, and the specimens destroyed. I can't believe I missed that.'

'So somehow the Cybermen found out about this place.'

‘And sent a suppression team to wipe them out before they found out anything useful.’

‘So what now?’ Chile asked, but Dorothea wasn’t listening.

She had stopped suddenly in the middle of the corridor, tensed ready to pounce, eyes elsewhere. She had that look on her face that said Wolsey had found something, and she was seeing it through his eyes. Whatever it was, Chile could tell that it had freaked her. He immediately thought of silver death-masked giants, striding down the corridors, ready to obliterate anybody who had dared to try to learn their secrets.

‘What is it?’

‘No,’ Dorothea said, not hearing. ‘Not him.’

And a second later she was hurtling down the corridors at breakneck speed, leaving Chile to run after her, head full of silver and dark.

Nine forty-one and fifteen seconds. Lars sat in the lead truck, the Sergeant at Arms next to him, formulating their plan of attack. The Project had obviously made its base up at the Manor - would return their once the villagers were all eliminated. A small squad of the CyberMusketeers would be sent in to the building to flush the Project out, into the waiting arms of the squadron. Once it was out in the open, the weight of numbers would be in their favour - they could only expect loses of seventy percent, seventy-five at the most. He just prayed that the Project hadn’t managed to kill the Doctor yet: if it got the com device back, then this whole thing could get out of hand, fast. He turned

to the Sergeant at Arms:

‘Don’t forget, Sergeant. Shoot to kill.’

The Sergeant at Arms reached for his radio. Nine forty-one and twenty-five seconds.

‘Sir,’ said the driver, pointing to the road ahead.

‘We’ve got company, sir,’ said the Sergeant at Arms.

Nine forty-one and thirty-one seconds. Lars looked and saw a blue family saloon car speeding down the road towards them, bouncing this way and that, dragging torn and battered greenery behind it, a sure sign of a cut corner or two. He could just make out three passengers - all dark shadows behind the glass. He turned to the Sergeant at Arms, an order half on his lips.

Nine forty-one and thirty-one seconds. The Sergeant threw the car down the side of the valley, ducking through fields and gardens when the road twisted just too much. He could see the convoy in front of them, four green cloth-covered trucks, moving ponderously up towards the Manor. He would have flashed his lights, sounded his horn, done *something*, but it was all he could do to keep his hands on the wheel, stop the car sliding into a ditch. It had been too long since his Police driving training. It didn’t matter. What ever he did wasn’t enough for the Doctor.

‘Faster, Sergeant,’ urged the imp at his left ear. He resisted the temptation to suggest he drove: he was afraid that he might take him up on the offer.

If he squinted, the Sergeant could just make out the driver of the lead truck pointing up at them. God knows what they thought was going on. Terrorist attack, local copper gone crazy, anything but the truth.

Nine forty-one and thirty-three seconds.

‘We’re too late,’ the Doctor whispered.

And just off to the side of the trucks, the Sergeant thought he could see two silver dots, converging.

Nine forty-one and thirty-five seconds.

The Cyberman stopped, scanning the area, waiting for the signal. It had located the targets - the four large transports, filled with the armed human targets, the smaller transport filled with three unarmed human targets. The armed targets took priority: that was why it centred its scan on the four trucks, why the Doctor went unnoticed for at least another minute. That was why its first target was the second truck in the line, why its first grenade was destined for that.

It began booting up the appropriate programme, its vision clearing, everything coming into sharp focus. A small screen appeared in one corner of its vision, filled with the same picture of the four covered transports from the other side: the CyberLieutenant’s view of the targets. Sub-processors deep within its mind worked out just the correct proportions of adrenaline to release into the system to allow its wetware components to function at optimal efficiency. It even had a spare millisecond to scan for a suitable replacement

for the Forge: perhaps one of the occupants of the smaller transport?

Nine forty-one and forty seconds. The signal came.

CYBERLIEUTENANT IN POSITION. COMMENCE ATTACK.

One second later, and the grenade hit its target.

The first grenade hit with enough force to force the first two trucks clean off the road and into a neighbouring field. The first truck landed on its side, shaking the occupants but only killing a few. The second truck was a smoking ruin lying gutted in the grass. The driver of the third truck didn't have long to think about that, though, because a millisecond later and another grenade had hit his truck. A moment later, and there were two smoking ruins in the field, and two over-turned trucks with shaken soldiers starting to crawl out of them.

TARGET NUMBERS REDUCED: 50%. REMAINING PERCENTAGE ARMED: 50%.

Lars was the first to crawl out of the lead truck, scrambling over the body of its driver, impaled on the steering wheel. He was followed closely by the Sergeant at Arms, who quickly assessed the situation and began barking out orders.

The troops quickly filed out of the wrecks - Lars guessed they had half as many as when they started - and began scrambling round for cover. The Project had chosen the site for its attack well: the only protection in the field

was the smoking ruins of the trucks. Lars could see the silver glint of his troops CyberGuns, and the CyberGloves the troops wore to confuse the guns into thinking they were being held by their true masters. The fingers ended in tiny jack-plugs, linking directly into the guns, sending the correct protocols to the weapons faster than most human computers could handle. Within moments, the pulse of plasma rifles filled the air, the energy bolts raining both ways. He could see his troops - only those armed with the CyberGuns - being carefully picked off one by one.

‘Stop the car,’ the Doctor ordered abruptly, and the Sergeant instantly obeyed. ‘Sophie, take this.’

Turning in her seat, Sophie saw that the Doctor was offering her the small circuit from the bag. She held out a hand and took it carefully. It felt cool in her palm. The Doctor’s face was grave as he looked deep into her eyes.

‘That is the most dangerous thing you will ever hold,’ he warned. ‘At the first sign of a Cyberman, you get far away from here. Do you understand.’

She nodded, mute.

‘Good. Stay here.’

And with that, he opened the car door and was gone.

Instinctively, the Sergeant reached for his door, wanting to be where the action was, where he could protect his village. Sophie reached out a hand, held his arm, shook her head.

‘Didn’t you hear him?’ she said. ‘How am I meant to get away if you go down there?’

And the Sergeant’s eyes dropped to her useless legs, there in the

passenger seat, and he stayed put, hands on the wheel, fingers drumming nervously. Sophie looked down at the circuit in her hand, then out at the carnage in front of her.

VEN MAQU IS LOCATED. REFERENCING.

Both Cybermen saw the Doctor at the same time, highlighted in brilliant flashes of red against the dull green of the unarmed targets and the oranges flashes of the armed. They both had the same thought at the same time, even as they continued picking off the armed targets one by one. A thousand different protocols began to whirr into life, preparing to change the focus from one target to another, when they were halted.

VEN MAQU IS PROGRAMME SUSPENDED. ARMED TARGETS PRIORITY.

And so the Doctor escaped for another few seconds, not even realising.

It took Lars a few moments longer to realise the Doctor was on the field of battle. He was too busy watching all his plans fall apart, as easily as the CyberMusketeers were being picked off, one by one. There could barely be twenty-left now, and the regular troops were next to useless against the Project's armour. He couldn't understand how it was out-manoeuvring them so effectively - they hadn't even clapped eyes on it yet, and it seemed to be moving all around them. Then the Doctor appeared at his side, and everything went from bad to worse.

'Have you got Glitterguns?' he asked urgently.

'What?' Lars shouted over the sounds of people dying.

‘Gold dust,’ the Doctor yelled back.

‘Not effective.’

‘Not effective?’ the Doctor echoed in disbelief.

‘Redesigned breathing apparatus. Gold dust isn’t a viable weapon any more.’

‘Radiation?’ a shake of the head. ‘Solvents?’

‘None of those things are effective any more, Doctor. We ironed out all those problems.’

‘We?’ realisation, starting to dawn.

‘It was meant to obey its superiors,’ Lars said.

‘Look around. Do you see anything superior to that?’

‘We had no idea what we were doing.’

‘What *were* you doing?’

Lars turned to him, and the Doctor could see the fear in his eyes. He could hear the bitter sarcasm in his voice, even above the sounds of the battle.

‘It took thirty years of careful research, but Project Vali finally managed to reach completion. The creation of a super-soldier for the European army: a human Cyberman hybrid,’ the Doctor’s face went hard as stone. ‘It seems to have picked up the family traits quite well, don’t you think?’

ARMED TARGETS REMAINING: 18.

The Cyberman took careful aim, the crosshairs in its vision falling smoothly over one of the flashing orange targets. A milliseconds pause as the weapons systems brought themselves up to full strength, then a flash of darkness as filters dropped into place to protect the delicate visual circuits from the glare of the weapon. Down in the field, there was a flash and the orange target vanished. Its vision cleared as the filters lifted, and it started scanning for the next target.

ARMED TARGETS REMAINING: 17.

A flash from the CyberLieutenant's weapon, and another orange target disappeared.

ARMED TARGETS REMAINING: 16.

A sharp ping of the scan locating something of vital importance. In the smaller vehicle, resting at the crest of the rise to the North, was the stolen device. There was a pause as the Cyberman's computers reassessed the situation, arranging a list of priorities. In the brief pause, there was a flash, and another target disappeared.

ARMED TARGETS REMAINING: 15. ARMED TARGETS DROPPED BELOW PRIORITY LEVEL. *VEN MAQU IS* PROGRAMME REINITIATED.

Something else to consider. It took nearly a full second for this new information to be assimilated.

CYBERLIEUTENANT TO FULFIL *VEN MAQU IS* PROGRAMME. CYBERUNIT TO REGAIN STOLEN DEVICE.

And with that decided, the Cyberman rose, and started working its way

around to the small vehicle, still raining plasma bolts down on the troops below, with deadly accuracy.

‘Humans!’ the Doctor cursed loudly.

‘Volunteers,’ laughed Lars bitterly, misunderstanding.

The Doctor drew himself up to his full height, past his full height, towering over Lars, a giant of darkness. The European man cowered below him, glancing fearfully up, terrified more of this dark vision than the tower of glinting metal he had helped create, that would ultimately destroy them all. As the Doctor spoke, there couldn’t be a soul in that field - in that village - that didn’t look at their lives, find them wanting, promise themselves that it would be different, that they would be different.

‘Look up there. Look around you. That creature up there is the machine world’s perfect answer to evolution: man and machine in ghoulish harmony. They change, they adapt, and with each change, each adaptation, they grow stronger, harder to kill. And you took it upon yourself to help them, to add your own twisted amateur knowledge of death to theirs? Do you think they needed it? You can barely understand the complexities of your own brains, and you thought you could understand the multitude of protocols and counter-protocols that make up even the tiniest layer of the cybernetic brain. Did you? Look at it, look around you. What do you see?’

And Lars did look, saw death raining down around him, not touching him, never touching him, and thought of his grandfather.

‘I see the Fuhrer’s dream come true. *Ubermensch*. Supermen. That’s why I had to do it.’

‘You had to?’

And Lars knew then that the Doctor had to know, had to understand. Because there couldn’t be long left, for any of them.

‘I had to. It’s unstoppable, Doctor. But they wouldn’t listen, wouldn’t terminate the project. So I had to let it escape, so they’d send troops, destroy it. I didn’t want to take Europe back to the dark ages, with this government trying to re-enact Hitler’s dream. I thought it would be easy, with what we knew. I took the com circuit, to stop them transmitting the new designs to the CyberController - even thought we could track it down later and destroy the entire CyberRace. But I was wrong. You have to destroy it, Doctor. All of it.’

And the Doctor looked down on him, felt his hearts break.

‘Lars,’ he said softly.

Then it happened.

Sophie saw it first, watching the edge of the battle. She reached out with a clamp-like grasp, but there was no need. The Sergeant had seen it too. A giant silver shape heading down into the fields below. Fire sprouted from its arm, and men on the field simply disappeared. They could both see where it was heading.

‘It’s going for the Doctor. We’ve got to do something.’

A seconds pause. Sophie screamed the Sergeant's name again, demanded he do something. Then a crunch as he threw the car into gear, a lurch as he planted his foot firmly on the accelerator.

'Hold on,' he said through gritted teeth, feeling every one of the shards of glass worming their way into his back.

And at breakneck speed, the car bounced through the fields, towards the battle. Heading straight towards the Doctor.

As the Doctor watched, he saw a small dot of red appear hovering over Lars' heart. Before he had registered anything - not even that the noise and confusion all around him had suddenly grown louder - the dot blossomed into a flower of brilliant yellow, and he had to throw a hand up to protect himself. But he didn't close his eyes. He watched, horror stricken, as Lars exploded into dust, right before his very eyes.

It took him a second to register what had happened. A second too long. He spun round just in time to see the silver giant striding up to him, one arm pointing accusingly at him. The only thing that had saved him so far was the number of soldiers who ran into the line of fire, trying to get a clear shot at the Cyberman. It swatted and slashed its way through them all, making a steady path towards its intended target. The Doctor.

By the time it registered that he should run, it was already too late.

The Cyberman stood in front of him, gun arm pointing straight at his chest. The blast would obliterate both of his hearts, but that didn't matter: he

wouldn't have a chest to keep them in any more. He thought he could just hear the slight whine of its weapons systems powering up.

'This isn't fair,' he said. 'I've already been dead once.'

And then it happened.

A blue saloon car came flying through the air, planting itself firmly into the Cyberman's side. The Doctor glanced up, saw Sophie and Sergeant Murphy jolted behind the wheel as the car's forward motioned stopped suddenly. The Cyberman barely moved, barely even registered the hit, but the entire bonnet of the car crumpled, a concertina. It stopped just before the windscreen, stopping the driver and his passenger from being killed instantly by the engine.

The Cyberman paused for just a second, assessing the threat of this new arrival. By the time it decided that the Time Lord took priority, it was too late.

One of the CyberMusketeers - quite possibly the last one left alive - managed to line up his shot, and pulled the trigger.

A tiny pinprick of red appeared on the back of the CyberLieutenant's head, quickly blossoming into a flower of brightest, most brilliant yellow. Although the entire back of its head vanished, the Cyberman's death-mask face was still glaring down at the Doctor as it lurched forwards. He only just managed to jump out of the way in time, narrowly avoiding being the CyberLieutenant's last victim, crushed beneath its giant frame. As it fell face down in the grass, the Doctor looked down at it, and felt both of his hearts shift from his throat.

It was a full five seconds before the fifteen soldiers left alive started cheering.

ELEVEN

Little Sarfield: 24. November, 2003

10:13

The Cyberman watched from the crest of the hill as its target raced away, down the hill, towards the *Ven Maqu Is*. It watched as the CyberLieutenant found its target - the *Ven Maqu Is* himself - lined him up in its sights. It watched the vehicle plough straight into the Cyberman, barely even denting its armour. It watched as one of the armed targets lined the CyberLieutenant up and destroyed it with a single shot.

CYBERLIEUTENANT DESTROYED. UPGRADING THIS UNIT'S DESIGNATION.

Once the programme was complete, the CyberLieutenant looked down on the field of battle and saw the human targets in celebration. This was

illogical if they thought they were under threat, so it followed that they thought there was only one CyberUnit. They obviously had no information regarding the conversion of the Human Target Designation: Suitable the previous night. This required a different tactic: stealth.

PRIORITIES: ACQUIRE THE STOLEN DEVICE. COMPLETE *VEN MAQU IS* PROGRAMME. TRANSMIT NEW DESIGN PARAMETERS TO CYBERLEADER. BEGIN.

Steadily, cautiously, the CyberLieutenant started to move down towards the field, ready to fulfil its priorities.

‘Are you alright?’ the Doctor asked urgently.

‘Yeah,’ said the Sergeant.

‘I think so,’ Sophie said, looking down at the circuit in her hand. It was unbroken, barely scratched.

The Doctor nodded, pulled open the door to the drivers side, then moved round to the passenger side.

‘Good. Quickly - everybody out,’ he ordered, and added: ‘Thank you. You saved my life.’

Then, with barely an effort, he hoisted Sophie into his arms and carried her away from the damaged car, heading for the last truck in the line. Already the remaining soldiers were crowding round it, using their combined strength to bounce it back onto its wheels. It was dented, but would still run. The

Sergeant was rushing up beside them, trying to establish a chain of command, but the soldiers were mostly ignoring him. It was only as the Doctor approached that they paid him any attention.

‘Sergeant,’ he called to Murphy. ‘Get one of those Privates to make sure no-one touches that Cyberman.’

‘Yes, sir,’ the Sergeant snapped back, and the Doctor dropped him a wink. From that moment on, all the soldiers left standing listened intently to what Murphy had to say.

Carefully, with a gentleness that reminded her of Stevie, the Doctor placed her in the cab of the uprighted truck. He smiled at her, warmly and said:

‘You’ll be alright here. I’ll be back soon.’

And then he left, joining the bustle of people running around the dead Cyberman. Left Sophie looking down at the cool circuit in her hand, wondering how many had died because of it.

The CyberLieutenant saw the stolen device glowing red in its vision, and the flash of red that was the Doctor in the distance. It saw the human female that held the device, and saw that the vehicle she was in could easily out pace the Cyberman for at least a short while. It would have to be careful that it didn’t give her opportunity or reason to fly. As it casually reached down and impaled a soldier running around the back of the truck with its sword arm, the CyberLieutenant noticed that the Human Female Target was damaged,

that her legs were non-functional. Then a plan of action occurred to it.

Sophie saw it suddenly in her field of vision, stood beside her arms outstretched. She tried to shout, but her voice refused to work. She could see that none of the others had seen it, crowded around the dead Cyberman.

GIVE ME THE STOLEN DEVICE, it said, to her and her alone.

She looked down at the circuit in her hand and made a stupid decision. She shook her head. The Cyberman seemed to understand the gesture.

OUR KIND WERE ONCE LIKE YOU, the creature said, softly, its voice aimed at her and her alone. WEAK. FLESH AND BLOOD. INOPERATIVE FLESH AND BLOOD.

Without thinking, Sophie's hand dropped to her legs, cold and useless. She couldn't even feel her fingers on the skin.

BUT WE ADVANCED, the creature continued. WE DEVELOPED SURGICAL TECHNIQUES TO REPLACE INEFFECTIVE LIMBS.

Sophie's eyes dropped to the creature's silver legs, muscular, strong, then to hers.

GIVE ME THE DEVICE, said the creature, AND YOU WILL BE LIKE US. YOU WILL WALK AGAIN.

'I've never walked,' she managed to whisper, but the creature said nothing.

She sat there, her mind full of memories. Sat in her chair whilst the other girls played hockey. Sat at her wedding, Stevie having to bend down to lift her veil and kiss her. Stevie having to pick her up and put her in the bath, in

the car, on the bed. The Sergeant trying to push her along in her chair one day at his house for a barbecue. The Sergeant struggling with her to the car when they needed to escape the house, because . . . because . . . She couldn't help it. She knew what she should say, what she should do, what she had to do.

There were tears in her eyes as she held out the circuit to the giant.

'Okay,' she said. 'Please.'

With surprisingly gentle fingers, the Cyberman reached out and took the circuit, slotting it into its slit mouth and swallowing it into whatever passed as its stomach.

STOLEN DEVICE RETRIEVED. CONNECTING.

The Cyberman stood for a second, receiving information, looking down at the Female Target in front of it. Several things entered its brain at once. It was informed that the device would take five minutes to connect and be brought up to operational status; it was informed that the vehicle in front of it could only be worked by targets with functioning legs; it was informed that, therefore, the Female Target was no threat and could safely be ignored; it was informed that the *Ven Maqu Is* programme still needed completing.

'What about me?' Sophie said. 'What about me?'

Ignoring Sophie, the Cyberman stepped out in front of the truck and tried to take aim, pacing steadily forwards as it did.

Because it ignored Sophie, it failed to see her realise her mistake, realise that the creature had lied. It failed to see a glint of determination spark in her eyes as she saw the creature take aim at the Doctor. It even failed to notice as she turned the key in the ignition, dropping to the floor of the cab to pump the accelerator with her hands. It only noticed her, in fact, when its proximity sensors warned it about the approaching vehicle.

Registering its mistake, it formulated a plan. It first decision was to let the truck hit. That was referenced against its databanks and queried due to the manner of the destruction of the previous Lieutenant. Given the similarity of the circumstances, the plan was abandoned, and a new one formulated. The vehicle would have to be destroyed. And so, a fraction of a second before the truck hit, the Cyberman raised its gun arm and fired at full power.

‘Doctor, look!’ Murphy shouted, pointing behind them.

The Doctor turned just in time to see another Cyberman - it had converted someone, why hadn’t he guessed that it would? - fire at point blank range at a truck hurtling towards it. There was a brilliant flare of yellow, which everyone but the Doctor was forced to turn away from. The sound of the explosion washed over them in a wave, deafening a few of the surrounding soldiers, obliterating the sound of the Doctor screaming out a single word.

‘Sophie!’

And as the light died, the Doctor was the only one who could see the wreckage of the truck - the entire front of the vehicle melted away into nothing,

the rest of its frame burning with a blue fire. He was the only one who could see that nothing could have escaped that blast, nothing human. And he was the only one to see the tarnished silver shape of the Cyberman striding out of the flames, devil's eyes glowing brilliant red.

And he was the only one to see it raise its gun arm, point it straight at him.

The CyberLieutenant struggled out of the wreckage, and did a quick damage assessment. Even before the results were in, it was aiming its gun at the *Ven Maqu Is*, sending the signal to fire. Even before it registered that it's vision was black, blinded by the explosion's glare. Even before it realised that the weapon had failed to fire.

DAMAGE REPORT, came the CPU's response. HAND WEAPON NO LONGER FUNCTION. ARM BLADE CAN NO LONGER EXTRACT. VISION IMPAIRED - SWITCHING TO SONAR.

Suddenly the world sprung to life around it again, created as a three dimensional image in its CPU, imagined from the sound waves bouncing back into its damaged receivers in its head. It carefully filed the information of the failure of its new tactic in its data-banks and waited for a new plan to be suggested.

PERFORMANCE DOWN TO 45%. *VEN MAQU IS* PROGRAMME SUSPENDED - TRANSMISSION OF DESIGN DATA PRIORITY.

Then came a word that the CyberLieutenant wasn't used to seeing at all:

RETREAT.

The Doctor watched as the Cyberman stood for a second, gun arm unwavering. Then he saw it turn, quickly, and disappear into the greenery around the field. It was only then that he realised he'd been holding his breath.

'We were only told about one target,' a private said behind him.

'They multiply. It's what they're best at,' the Doctor said.

The Sergeant was at his side in an instant, saying Sophie's name softly. The Doctor shook his head sadly.

'Where's it going?'

'It's damaged.'

'How can you tell?'

'It didn't kill me,' the Doctor said flatly. 'I have to get to the village.'

'Why?' Murphy asked, trotting along beside the Doctor as he rushed to the other end of the field.

'Transport,' he called over his shoulder. 'I have to follow it.'

Murphy stopped. The pain in his back was to much to bear, almost as great as the pain in his heart.

'Why? Where's it going?'

The Doctor didn’t stop, just shouted back:

‘To the Manor. Where else?’

TWELVE

Little Sarfield: 24. November, 2003

10:20

Chile rested the body down gently on the grass. The cold winter sun merely highlighted how pale it was, how vivid the red slash all the way down its front. Dorothea stood back and looked down at him, an unreadable look on her face. Chile wanted to ask why they'd carried one body out of the abattoir, why that one out of a hundred, wanted to put an arm round her and tell her it would be alright. He didn't do either, of course, but he wanted to.

'Who is he?' he asked.

Dorothea stood, silent, perhaps thinking he'd asked Wolsey. But the Kitling was skulking in a corner somewhere, trying to rid himself of the Forge's gloop, and there was no-one else around. Chile moved closer, and repeated

himself, softly.

‘Michael Smith,’ she said. ‘He worked here. I came here to speak to him.’

He looked down at the young boy’s face, pale and unmoving. He had blond hair, probably blue eyes. He looked young. Was young. He wondered what he’d done to warrant Dorothea’s attention, and actually had the nerve to ask, for once.

‘His father was adopted,’ she answered, pausing as if that was all. Then: ‘His grandparents had a boy when they were young, in their twenties. They were Russian - the grandfather an officer in the Soviet Army. When the mother was killed, the father swore to look after him. But then he got sent to England on a top secret mission and got himself killed too. So the grandfather was adopted into a English family: the grandfather had an English grandmother whose family arranged the whole thing. So he lost his original name, took on Smith after the man who brought the baby to them. Then he got married and had two children. One of them was Michael’s father.’

‘I don’t see a connection.’

‘I knew Michael’s grandfather, was there when he died. And I knew his great-great-great-grandfather, a count of St. Petersburg. I messed him about a bit. A lot. He reminded me of his great-great-grandson. I broke his heart.’

‘And you wanted to make it up to Michael.’

‘I wanted to tell him a bit about his family, the ones he didn’t know. But I’m too late.’

And silently, without show, Dorothea reached up and pulled a badge

from her lapel, and bent down and pinned it to the corpse's uniform. As she stood up, looking down at the hammer and sickle glinting back up in the sunlight, Chile reached out and held her reassuringly in his arms. They were still stood like that when the Doctor pulled up behind them on an old Triumph Fury, letting it fall to the floor as he leapt off.

'Is it here?' he asked urgently.

'What?' Dorothea asked.

'The Cyberman,' the Doctor asked darkly.

All eyes went up to the Manor behind them.

'Stay here,' the Doctor said, heading for the front door.

Dorothea ran up behind him, put a firm hand on his shoulder.

'I'm coming with you,' she said.

'Too dangerous. Stay with Chile.'

'I'm a big girl now, Doctor. I do this for a living.'

The Doctor looked into her eyes, softened. He reached up with a cold hand and gently flicked the end of her nose, smiling. Dorothea smiled too.

'Don't worry. I'll be back,' he said. 'I've been dead once. I didn't enjoy it.'

'Do you know how long its been since you did that?' she asked.

'Too long,' the Doctor admitted, 'for both of us. Chile, make sure she stays away from the Manor.'

Chile nodded, stepping forward protectively. He needn't have bothered: Dorothea stood back, grinning like a fifteen year old, as the Doctor

disappeared into the depths of the dark house. She smiled as she lead her away from the Manor, even smiling still as he went back and dragged Michael's body to safety. She was still smiling five minutes later when every brick in the Manor decided they didn't like where they had sat for the last three hundred years and all tried to make for the heart of the building, dragging the Manor down to the ground in front of them.

The Cyberman stood at the heart of the building, in total darkness. Even though it couldn't see, it could hear every wall, every piece of furniture in the room. It could hear where the spiders webs in the corners were, could hear the floorboards above it complaining at their age-old burden. So when the Doctor arrived in the room, it knew instantly, had its gun arm covering the Time Lord before he'd even before he'd registered where the Cyberman was in the gloom.

'I'm assuming that doesn't work,' the Doctor said, edging forwards. 'But if I'm wrong, please, use it.'

Nothing, only silence.

'Well, that's good.'

YOU WILL BE DESTROYED.

'Really? Then why don't you destroy me?' the Doctor paused again. 'What's the problem? Change of heart? Or perhaps that explosion damaged you more than you'd like me to know. Slowly wearing you down, is it. Until you're dead, gone.'

YOU WILL BE DESTROYED.

‘I don’t doubt it,’ the Doctor said, coldly, eyes elsewhere. ‘I was, in fact. But now I’m back. Nothing to do with you, I take it?’

Silence. Only silence.

‘No. I didn’t think so,’ the Doctor said, almost regretfully. ‘I suppose before I might have come in here with some sort of plan, some way of grinding you into defeat, wiping out your family, your race. But I don’t need to now, do I. You’ve destroyed yourself. Perhaps I never needed to.’

Unnoticed, Wolsey padded reluctantly into the room, still matted with gunk and dust and God alone knew what else. But he resisted the urge to clean himself, at his Sister’s instruction, and sat in silence, watching.

WHAT DO YOU WANT, *MAQU IS*? the Cyberlieutenant asked firmly, its voice shaking the dust from the rafters.

‘Is that what you call me?’ he said, surprised. 'Telosian? I’ll have to translate it, at some point.’

THERE WILL BE NO BARGAINS.

‘You’ve killed a good many of my friends, today, over the years. I know you of old,’ the Doctor spat. ‘What makes you think I’d bargain with you?’

WHAT DO YOU WANT? the Cyberman repeated.

‘I . . .’ said the Doctor, and stopped.

DESIGNS RECEIVED, the Cyberlieutenant’s CPU told it silently. DESTROY *VEN MAQU IS*. DESTROY ALL REMAINING COPIES OF

DESIGNS.

And the Cyberman merely remained despite knowing exactly what that last message meant.

‘I should go,’ the Doctor said, turning.

MAQU IS? the Cyberman started.

The Doctor paused in the doorway, turning back to the creature. His Sister’s unease flooding through his system, Wolsey stood, tensed, ready for action.

‘Yes?’ said the Doctor.

A pause. The Cyberman’s eyes glowed red.

VEN MAQU IS. THE DOCTOR. THE HOME EATER.

Another pause. The Doctor tried to think what was worrying him, tried to realise his mistake.

‘Thank you,’ he said, doffing his hat.

DIE, the Cyberman intoned, eyes a brilliant flame red.

And then he realised. The Cyberman wasn’t being helpful - it was trying to detain him. The brilliant red glow in its eyes, growing in intensity with each passing second, was a result of its final command: it was slowly stripping away the shielding from its central reactor. In approximately three seconds, the core would go critical, and the Cyberman would commit suicide with such passion and intensity that it would take most of the Manor with it. And the Doctor.

Chiding himself for his mistake, the Doctor tried to jump. Then he

remembered he was cured of the Cheetah Virus, and all its little bonuses. So he prepared himself to die, instead.

Home, said the voice in Wolsey's head, full of urgency.

And the Kitling pounced, grabbing hold of its prey in its field, opening that small part of its mind and jumping, taking its prey home with it.

ADDITION TO CENTRAL CPU, the Cyberman transmitted calmly. POSSIBILITY OF DOCTOR TARGET POSSESSING TELEPORTATION ABILITY: 99.9%

And then it imploded, taking most of the Manor down with it.

Brigadier Bambera was standing, hurting nobody, in the central lobby of UNIT HQ, London - which, she reminded herself, was meant to have a Top Secret location and security system - and scratching her head. Life, it seemed, was conspiring to make things difficult for her. On top of jet-lag, now she had *this* sitting on her doorstep. She was just wondering how she was going to deal with it, when things got ten times worse.

With a flash of brilliant white light, the Doctor appeared in a heap in front of her, and Wolsey trotted off towards McShane's quarters, leaving a trailing of muddy footprints all the way across her nice clean floor. She arched an eyebrow and tried not to sound surprised.

'Are you alright?' she asked the heap at her feet.

The mass of clothes and flesh quickly unfolded itself until the Doctor

was standing right in front of her, that damned grin on his face, his hand outstretched for the shaking. She let it stay there, untouched, but that didn't seem to faze him. He just took a deep breath, composed himself, and slipped into that neutral gear in which he seemed to spend most of his life: annoying everybody.

'Brigadier Bambera!' he hollered, everybody in the foyer looking round at her. 'Fine, I'm fine.'

'Shame,' she said, and turned to inspect her floor.

'Please accept my apologies about the floor,' he said, leaning in confidentially. 'Wolsey's just saved my life. So, this is where he thinks of as home now, is it?'

'Unfortunately, so it would seem, Doctor.'

'It used to be the TARDIS, you know. But that was some time ago now.'

Bambera looked him squarely in the eyes, that look that suggested he was playing games with her again firmly planted on her face. He smiled disarmingly, but she didn't flinch.

'How's Ancelyn?' he tried.

'About the TARDIS, Doctor,' she said. 'Misplaced it, have you?'

'As it happens, I have,' he said, realisation creeping across his face. 'I hadn't thought about it. It's been a hectic couple of days.'

'I can imagine, so have mine. Because of you,' Bambera snapped. 'But next time, if you could not use UNIT HQ like some kind of lost and found depot, I'd be able to sleep a lot more soundly.'

‘I’m sorry, Brigadier?’ the Doctor said, confused.

Bambera turned, pointing into a corner of the foyer, saying:

‘Your hawk-faced friend delivered it five minutes ago, to the annoyance of security.’

And the Doctor followed her finger, and saw resting in the corner a familiar blue box, wrapped in an unfamiliar pink ribbon, and with a small note attached. He walked up to the TARDIS and plucked the note from its perch. *Congratulations*, it said, *on your recent resurrection.*

Somewhere, just out of earshot, a raven cawed loudly, it’s laughter echoing all round London, for those who could hear it.

EPILOGUE

‘*Keep your eye on where you’re going,*

Lest you lose your goal.

Keep you’re eye on where you’ve been,

Lest you lose your soul.’

Thal Travelling Song

Little Sarfield: 3. December, 2003

19:29

Sergeant Wagner looked up at the dark sky above, tried counting the stars, wondered if the snow would hold off until he made it home. Then, with a slow motion of his arm that send twinges running up and down his back, he reached out and locked the police station for the last time. It was very final, forever. He wished he’d brought a bottle of wine, give it a bit more sense of

occasion.

‘Here,’ said a voice at his elbow, and handed him a glass of chilled Chardonnay.

He spun round quickly, and saw the Doctor stood there beside him, looking solemn. In his hand, he had another glass of wine. There wasn’t a bottle to be seen. His waistcoat was as red as ever, his hat jammed firmly on his head. His umbrella was open and slung over one shoulder, anticipating the snow to come. Just like him - always one eye on the future.

‘You,’ Murphy said, not touching his wine. ‘You took your time in coming back.’

He nodded, saying:

‘I wanted to wait until I’d caught you up a bit.’

‘Come back to finish her off?’

‘I’m sorry?’

‘It’s all gone. Once the soldiers were through with it, the Cybermen, well, most people were too afraid to stay here any more. Just like last time you came to town. She won’t survive this time.’

‘Who?’ the Doctor asked.

‘Who? The village, Little Sarfield. Look around you, Doctor, it’s as silent as the grave. You’ve killed her.’

The Doctor said nothing, merely looking up at the stars. Then:

‘There used to be another village, you know. Before Little Sarfield. Just Sarfield, up there, closer to where the Manor used to be,’ he gestured up, and

Murphy couldn't help but let his eyes follow the motion. All he could see was the House, staring back down at them. 'It wasn't large, bigger than this village, smaller than the city, but it was thriving. And then one day they all died, every last villager. And for fifty years there wasn't a village on this site, until Little Sarfield sprung up. Ask them in Bexston, they'll remember.'

'And that was your fault too, was it?' snapped the Sergeant.

'Yes,' said the Doctor simply, still looking up at the stars.

Surprised by the answer, the Sergeant - the soon to be retired Sergeant, he couldn't help reminding himself - looked again at the Doctor. Something in the way he held himself made Murphy realise that he had seen far more than he ever would, ever could. And the chill in his bones on a night like this must be a thousand times as cold.

'Is Dorothea alright?' he asked, softly.

'Fine, fine,' said the Doctor, mood brightening. 'Her and Wolsey are fine. And Chile's doing alright too.'

'I saw them at Sophie's funeral,' he said, remembering.

'I thought I should stay away,' the Doctor said, picking up on the implication. 'A lot of her family think the same as you.'

'I don't think it's your fault, Doctor,' the little man raised an eyebrow. 'Not really. It's just - this was the second time you came here, and it's the second time people have died. This time she won't bounce back - it was hard enough last time. It . . . it's just it's going to hurt to move away from her, after so long.'

'You don't have to,' the Doctor said. The Sergeant fixed him with a

stare. ‘Chile’s moving on, down to London. The House needs a new caretaker. I thought you might like the job.’

‘Stay here and watch her rot, you mean?’

‘She’ll survive,’ he said resolutely. ‘Believe me. She’ll lay dormant for a few years, and then she’ll come back, a phoenix from the flames. But you don’t have to take my word for it: you can watch it happen, if you’d like.’

And looking into the Doctor’s eyes, somehow Murphy believed him. He took a step towards the little man, smiling, and said:

‘Let’s go and find somewhere warm where we can talk about it, and finish off this wine.’

And so the Doctor’s question-mark umbrella swallowed them up as the walked away from the station, up towards the warmth of the House, eyes on the sky.

Softly, it began to snow.

TERRITORIAL MARKINGS

When Wolsey the Hunter was still Wolsey the Kitten, he found himself a new game to play. It called for courage, strength and guile, thankfully qualities that the young kitten was sure he possessed in abundance, despite recent experiences to the contrary. The rules were very simple: explore his bright new home and mark each new territory with his scent. The challenge came from the fact that the TARDIS would do its damnedest to stop him, often eradicating his scent the second it was sprayed, or even shifting itself around so that the corridors no longer led to the rooms they had the day before. Wolsey was not perturbed: he had courage, strength and guile. He would prevail.

His explorations had already taken him to many strange and wonderful rooms: there were the vast halls lined with papers bound in animal hides

(where he marked his scent along the row marked “G”); the giant pit of cracked tiles with the mystical incantation “No Ducking, No Diving, No Petting, No Pushing” printed by it (and, in an angular scrawl, the words “No Water” added below it); the room with the winged mice swooping around its ceiling (which – no matter how hard he tried – he had yet to taste). But none of these were his goal this morning. Today he would go where no-one had gone before, perhaps not even the Doctor-Father. Today he would go deep into the heart of the TARDIS.

So it was Wolsey spurned his usual goals, pushed on down the roundelled corridors until dusty red brick faded into their place. He followed what appeared to be rotting leaded pipes, but which had the same crisp scent as the rest of his new home, until he was led down crumbling stone and rusted metal staircases. And still he pushed on, satisfied with nothing less than the corridor’s final destination. Had he been an older and wiser Wolsey, he would have perhaps spurned the idea entirely, and would definitely have accepted defeat once the dust became so thick it caked his paws like slippers. But he was Wolsey the kitten, the hunter who would never rest, never stop until he could taste his prey in his mouth.

After half-an-hour’s more trudging through ankle deep dust, without an end in sight, Wolsey decided that whilst he was still Wolsey the Hunter who wouldn’t give up, he might take a little rest whenever it was absolutely necessary. Pushing on through the grime, he found an arched doorway leading away from the corridor and pushed his way through it.

The change was, to say the least, drastic.

As soon as he passed through the doorway, the dust vanished. As did the walls, the floor and the doorway itself. They were replaced by a thin covering of sand, rolling away far into the distance on every side, and a gentle breeze. High above him, Wolsey could see an expanse of tiny, twinkling stars gazing back down at him, aloof. To Wolsey, they seemed like the reflections from a thousand cats' eyes, each one a challenge to his territory. He gave them all a haughty sniff, and turned away. And spotted the figure.

It was stretched out on the sand like a corpse, arms by its side, eyes closed, chest not moving an inch. The figure's body was clad in some kind of fabric armour that glistened in the starlight in a way that appealed to Wolsey, somehow. He tipped his head to try and make the light dance some more, and purred softly to himself. He paid no attention to the corpse's bulbous head with its inflated features and greying skin, completely entranced by the free light show he had discovered. A light show – it stood to reason – that must be his and his alone.

His head dipping to the soft sand, Wolsey carefully padded forward on velvet paws, his eyes alert for the slightest sign of movement. He drank in the body's scent – a dusty and grey smell that could barely be distinguished from the sand around them. The scent was too dry, that much was sure: Wolsey felt confident that whatever the creature was, it wasn't alive. It was that deduction that gave him the confidence to bat the shining armour with a clawless paw, and – when that failed to get a reaction – it was that deduction that gave him the confidence to spray his scent over the glistening black fabric.

With a deep-throated hiss that Wolsey instantly recognised as anger, the body threw itself to its feet, its tiny black eyes glistening in the starlight.

There was a moment of stillness, first. The two opponents stood just for an instant, sizing each other up. Then Wolsey the Hunter reacted, every fibre of his being ready for the coming battle. He shot backwards like a bullet into a gun, never taking his eyes from the lumbering mountain that had so recently been his newly claimed shiny thing. A hiss of air escaped from between his razor teeth, and the fur along his body shot up, making him look twice his normal size. This made him now only sixteen times smaller than the round-headed creature, odds which worried Wolsey more than a true hunter should admit.

The creature's three-fingered hand dropped down automatically to a stubby looking tube clipped to his belt, and Wolsey's hiss turned to a growl, his face distorted with anger. There was another moment of stillness, and then the creature started to make a phlegmy growling noise. It was only as its hand came away from its belt that Wolsey realised it was laughing.

'I see you are a fellow warrior, feline,' it said, half-barked, half-hissed. 'I honour your bravery.'

Keeping a wary eye on the creature, Wolsey tried not to let the compliments go to his head. If – as he paced around the lumbering giant – he allowed a swagger to enter his step, well that was only to be expected. After all, Wolsey the Hunter was now Wolsey the Warrior, proud victor of his first confrontation. He should probably do something to cement his victory,

although given the size of the vanquished foe, Wolsey really couldn't think of anything appropriate. Instead, he settled for eyeing him casually.

'It seems we both have similar tactics,' the creature wheezed, waving a muscular arm over the sand. 'We both mark our territory, before settling.'

Wolsey saw the four glowing lights that stood about them on thin metal stands, but if he recognised what they were for, he kept it to himself. Perhaps realising his defeated enemy meant him no further harm, he rested back on his back legs and began cleaning himself instead, his rough tongue picking up the dust and grime of his previous adventures. The large creature chuckled to itself again.

'And it seems we both require cleaning,' it said, before using a handful of dry sand to rub away the pungent liquid.

Wolsey the Hunter paused again, watching the giant as it rubbed away the kitten's scent, a look of disgust on his face. The giant noticed this and – though the expression on its face didn't change – it nodded solemnly. A thick pink tongue darted out of its mouth, licking at lips that weren't there before he said:

'Perhaps you are right, feline,' it murmured. 'It is not good to have our mark so quickly erased.'

But Wolsey the Hunter was no longer listening. It had been a long day, so full of adventures. Dusty corridors to explore and vicious ogres to defeat. It was all very tiring. Curling himself around himself, Wolsey the Hunter became Wolsey the Sleeping.

As Wolsey chased the rabbit, his whole body twitched with the effort, teeth bared and eyes flicking. Then the rabbit turned into a giant round-headed ogre, but still Wolsey leapt forward courageously. He was busy shaking the life from the creature (somehow, either Wolsey had grown, or the creature had shrunk – he didn't care which) when suddenly he shook too hard and found himself lying asleep in the sand. Life, he decided, could be very confusing at times.

With a well-deserved stretch, Wolsey pulled the sleep out of his bones and rolled to his feet. It was still night – the stars still twinkling mischievously above him – and it was the perfect time for exploring. The game was still afoot, and some dark corner of the TARDIS was waiting to receive his scent. All that was needed was a little snack to build his energy up before the nights gaming, and he would be away.

That was when he noticed the creature, sitting in a crouch on the floor, its back to him. Along with the familiar rasp of its breath, it seemed to be making a high pitched whine which was most unlike it. The whining was enough to make Wolsey's sensitive ears ring most uncomfortably, and – in his opinion – that was something which couldn't be tolerated.

With a shrug, Wolsey was on his feet and pacing towards the ogre, thoughts of quick and brutal reprisals filling his mind. Which immediately evaporated the moment he closed in on the creature's bulky frame.

A less principled creature might have suggested that Wolsey was afraid, but that could not be the case. He was Wolsey the Hunter, and he had

already bested this creature once. No, if he paused it was not because of how very big and very powerful its armour clad muscles now seemed, but because of simple curiosity. How could it be anything else? Who else would not be curious, seeing such a large, powerful creature crouched at the centre of a collection of dry stones, gathered from who knew where? And besides, it was not the creature itself that made the whining noise, rather the tube in its hand, spitting a fine line of red fire into the heart of one of the stones, held firmly in a three-fingered grasp. Any reprisals could only be fairly directed at the tube, and that was merely a dumb tool.

The creature turned using it's shoulders – it didn't seem to have a neck to speak of – and gave Wolsey a savage nod.

'Ah, feline!' it gurgled, sounding pleased with itself. 'I trust you had a pleasant sleep.'

Wolsey snorted, as if to explain that any sleep – by the mere fact that it involved sleeping – was bound to be pleasant.

'I must thank you, feline,' the creature continued non-the-less. 'Your idea has proved most . . . interesting.'

And with a wave of a single stocky arm, the creature managed to encompass all the stones it had gathered around itself with a proud leer on its face. Most were just strewn carelessly across the sand but – on closer inspection – Wolsey could see that a small group of them had been piled together into some kind of structure. The actual design of it seemed haphazard to the careless observer, but Wolsey could see that each stone interlocked with its brethren to form a strong and solid base. A base for what,

however, he couldn't begin to guess.

'I have survived here for seventy years,' the creature almost sighed. 'It is fitting there should be some form of monument to my presence.'

Despite himself, Wolsey crept closer to the creature. He sniffed at the stone in its hand, his nose thrusting forwards then sinking back as he felt the heat coming from it. The creature licked his mouth again, and twisted the stone so that Wolsey could make out the carving on it. The words were unfamiliar – but then, what were words to Wolsey the Hunter? – but he could see that there were words there, carved by heat in a neat and compact (yet flowing) hand. If he had been able, Wolsey might have expressed surprise that the ogre's three thick fingers were capable of anything so . . . delicate.

'"This stone was placed by Avyr,"' the creature read proudly, '"in remembrance of his tenth day of survival."'

There was a hiss of pleasure as the creature leaned over and carefully slotted the finished stone into the structure. It fitted in perfectly with those around it, locking tight.

'I would have carved "Avyr – Foot-Soldier of the Fifth Brigade of the Glorious Sontaran Army",' it continued softly, 'but I fear my Brigade's battles are no longer the pride of Sontara Prime.'

Wolsey purred softly, as if to say that he understood. Creeping closer to the creature, he batted its powerful hand with the side of his head. The ogre looked confused for a moment, and then as Wolsey repeated the action, realisation dawned in its tiny black eyes. The fingers flexed gently, and it began to stroke the velvet fur behind the kitten's ears.

‘There will be a stone here for every day I have survived, feline, one day,’ the creature said, not caring if Wolsey was listening, nor even if he could understand. ‘The average life expectancy of a foot-soldier in the Glorious Sontaran Army is four point three years. I will soon reach my eightieth. I do not know how long I will continue to survive – it has been many centuries since a Sontaran warrior died of old age. I will be the first.’

Wolsey said nothing, save for a gentle purr. The creature paid him no heed, looking instead to the stars up above.

‘When I first discovered this room, I stayed in the hope I might see some evidence of the war progressing,’ it paused and pointed to a single speck in the firmaments. ‘That star is Sontara, that there the Rutan home star. Somewhere, the battle is still raging. Thousands of Sontarans – of Rutans – die every day. And I sit here, and make no difference. Yet still it rages on. I wonder if I made a difference when I fought in it.’

The ogre stopped then, as if afraid that putting the thoughts into words would bring the wrath of some vengeful god. Nothing happened. Nothing save Wolsey growing bored with the lack of stroking, and wandering away to see if he could find some breakfast.

With the closest it could muster to a shrug, the creature picked up its laser and its stone and recommenced its work.

Wolsey the Hunter had found his prey. His ears had been keen, his eyes sharp. He had seen the signs of life in the dusty desert, heard the quiet

squeaking of the prey muttering to its fellows. He had spotted the small, sandy vole as it had poked out of its hole, and the chase had been on. It had been a good chase, the hunter cutting of the prey's every attempt to retreat, his claws fast enough to bat the vole whenever it decided not to play the game. Even the best hunt grows stale after a few minutes, though, and Wolsey the Hunter was forced to end it, or die of boredom.

But once the hunt was over, Wolsey found his appetite had evaporated along with the fun. The only thing left to do was to carry his still twitching prey to one who might have some use for it. Picking up the struggling vole up in his teeth, Wolsey trotted proudly back towards the crouching ogre in the sand.

When he found it, the ogre was still busy carving his stones. The structure he was building, however, had grown in Wolsey's absence. It was now the base of a fine tower, heading straight up to the sky, growing so tall that the creature had to stretch upwards to place the next stone in place. It was just the sort of thing, thought Wolsey, that a brave and fearless hunter should claim as his own. But first there was the question of breakfast.

His tail flicking, Wolsey nudged the creature's hand again, and dropped the stunned vole into the powerful, grey hand.

'What is this, feline?' the creature asked. Wolsey merely gave him his best stare. 'Have you brought this for me? I do not require nourishment the way you do. I . . .'

The ogre paused, and let its hand drop to a box by its side. With a slow gesture, it pressed a smooth green button on the metal surface. The button instantly turned red, and from nowhere an enemy appeared.

Wolsey's hair stood on end immediately, as he hissed at the giant insect scuttling towards them. It looked like another stubby tube running around on spindly tripod legs, and whilst obviously mechanical, that was no reason to assume it couldn't be killed. But the ogre made a soothing noise deep in his throat, and let the machine run up its back. With a single jerk, the machine thrust its head into a hole in the creature's neck. There was a crackle of electricity, and then the machine withdrew, running back into the distance. Wolsey watched it go, convincing himself that he would have fought, if it had stayed longer.

'You see?' the creature gurgled softly. 'The energy feeds me. The machine drains energy from other machines, converts it to a form I can . . . digest. Here, it drains energy from the Doctor's machine. I find it . . . ironic that the machine that traps me, also nurtures me.'

The creature looked back down at the vole in its hand. The small vole was becoming more active now, recovering from its mauling at the hands of Wolsey the Hunter. Perhaps it would make interesting prey again. Wolsey's face grew interested, alive, yet the ogre's face was as flat and expressionless as the first moment Wolsey had seen it.

'I sometimes think we make our own traps, feline,' it said finally. 'I entered my trap freely, in the line of my duty. I knew of the TARDIS' properties and intended to claim them for Sontara Prime. I intended to be the soldier who destroyed the traitor, President Doctor, who had lured the entire Sontaran race into an even bigger trap. But I soon lost my Brigade, just as soon as I lost myself.'

Wolsey looked up at it, saying nothing still. Even the vole had the good sense to cease struggling.

‘I gave up my reconnaissance when I realised his TARDIS was changing the routes quicker than I could find them. I resigned myself to my trap. It was only reasonable, since I had constructed it,’ and again the tiny glass eyes fell on the vole in its hand. ‘But I can still free others from their traps.’

And with one hand on Wolsey’s neck to stop the kitten pursuing, the ogre let the vole run free, watching it with a child-like grin on its passive face as it disappeared into the sand.

Wolsey was, of course, disgusted. The hunt had been his. He had handed his trophy over expecting praise, and now the ogre had the nerve to set it free. It was unforgivable. But not as unforgivable as it now ignoring him, returning again to its stones and mumbling to itself.

‘It has been many centuries, feline,’ it gurgled away, ‘since a Sontaran has thought as I think. I fear it will be many centuries – if ever – before one does again.’

Or:

‘I have resigned myself to my trap, feline, but that is not to say I do not dream of seeing Sontara Prime one last time.’

Or:

‘Perhaps you will tell the Doctor of this place, when I am gone?’

Frankly, it was unforgivable. It would require desperate measures to

remedy, but luckily Wolsey the Hunter had a plan. He was swift of deed, and brave of action, and he would be recognised. Resting his paws on the ogre's thick leg, he nuzzled his head up towards its face. Normally, he'd aim for a chin, but in this case . . . Wolsey the Hunter could add versatility to his ever growing list of traits.

'Yes, feline?' the creature asked, as if expecting an answer.

But the trick had worked: the laser had been turned off. With one swift movement, Wolsey leaned in with his jaw open and snapped the device up into his mouth. As he turned and bolted, he heard the angry hiss again and felt the giant leap to its feet, giving chase. At last, he was gaining the attention he deserved. This was indeed a good game, and a true test of his abilities.

As Wolsey slipped back out into the dusty corridor, the creature was close behind him. For all its bulk, it could move with a turn of speed that was amazing. But Wolsey the Hunter was faster, and Wolsey the Hunter was smarter. He led the giant on a merry dance through corridor after corridor, sometimes but a whisker away from it before jumping ahead again, the laser still firmly in his mouth. Even as rough brick faded into bright, roundel, the brave young kitten raced ahead, and the lumbering creature didn't stand a chance.

It was a good game, but all games have to finish at some point. This one ended as the creature lurched after Wolsey and found itself stood in the bright light of a room it had forgotten existed, had only dreamt of before waking to sand and stars. The walls were bright, indented with dark roundels, and the centre of the room was a vast buzzing console, every facet covered

with switches, dials and buttons. But what the creature was staring at was something else. His tiny, half-buried eyes were focussed on the two double doors that stood at the opposite end. The two, wide open double doors, and the view beyond.

‘Sontara Prime,’ breathed the creature.

It stood for some time, not daring to take a step, breathing heavily. Then Wolsey the Hunter padded carefully up, and nudged his foot, purring softly. As the creature looked down, Wolsey dropped the laser at its feet, cocking his head. The creature looked at the laser, then at the kitten, and then smiled its first smile.

‘Thank you, feline,’ it gurgled, ‘but you may keep the weapon. I have no need of it.’

And with that, the creature stepped through the doors, and out onto its home.

Mere moments later, a figure emerged from the shadows and paced across the control room floor. He paused only to scoop up Wolsey the Hunter, barely noticing that the kitten was leaving hairs all over his dark jacket and paisley scarf. Instead he stopped at the console, and reached out with a single finger to flick a large red switch closed. With a hum, the double doors swung shut a second later, the figure still gazing out through them.

‘But I can still free others from their traps,’ said the Doctor to Wolsey, who sat immobile in his arms.

If Wolsey had been an older cat, he might have agreed, perhaps even nodded to himself and the Doctor carried him back into the heart of the TARDIS. But this was long ago, when Wolsey the Hunter was still Wolsey the Kitten, and so he merely purred, contented.

TAO

The first thing the Doctor did when he entered the TARDIS was to not make himself at home. He stood in the doorway for what seemed like an age, watching the lights on the console dance and flicker, the rotor shift begrudgingly up and down. There was not a trace of an emotion on his face, no hints of what went on in the hidden dark of his mind. Wolsey had no such problems – his desires were simple and few: to claim as much of his old hunting grounds back for himself as he could, and to get a well deserved rest. He would have to move fast if he was to fit such a diverse itinerary into the few minutes he had before the Doctor Brother took him back to his sibling. He padded quickly out of the control room, every second urgent, leaving the Doctor Brother to his silence.

The next time Wolsey the Hunter saw him, it was as he hurried past a

few minutes later, heading for the depths of the TARDIS. Wolsey paid him no heed: he was more concerned with disciplining a wall that had dared to removed his scent almost as soon as he could spray it. Besides, there were few places he could get to, inside the TARDIS.

The snow fell, which in itself was nothing remarkable. The monastery very rarely had a day go by without some snow, and yet the shaven headed monks still busied themselves in the courtyard with nothing to warm them but the occasional yak-butter tea. No, the unusual thing was the sound that rose over the bitter wind that carried the flakes: the deep resonant clang of the visitors bell.

Visitors were a rarity to the monastery, not because they discouraged them - quite the opposite, in fact. They were always polite and courteous, inviting any visitors in to partake in what meagre provisions they could provide. The problem was that not many visitors managed to make it up the side of a Tibetan mountain in the perpetual blizzards that covered them, and those that tried were often shot by the Chinese soldiers patrolling the foothills.

Yet if the Young Master felt any surprise at finding a short stranger standing behind the huge wooden gates, he didn't show it. Instead he simply ushered the stranger in, and listened politely to his request.

'I would be most honoured, Young Master,' began the stranger humbly, 'if I could meet with the Old Master.'

The Young Master merely bowed, and led the way.

That had been ten days ago. Once a day for those ten days, meals had been brought out to the initiate - there had been no formal announcement from the Old Master, but now all of the monks were referring to the stranger as the initiate. No-one could see him sitting in that patient lotus awaiting his audience with the Master and not know. Every night, the Young Master would bring him an extra blanket, and every morning he would return to take it and find the initiate in exactly the same position, his short black hair stiff with frost. If it wasn't for the soft rhythm of his breathing, the Young Master might have thought him dead.

Now, as well as bringing a meal and a blanket, the Young Master brought news.

'The Master will see you now.'

Nobody had asked what had been said in that meeting, and nobody had questioned when the Young Master had announced who would instruct the initiate. The brunt of the instruction had fallen to the Young Master, as was his duty. It was he who had helped the initiate to shave off his frozen locks, revealing pale raw skin underneath. It was he who had provided the initiate's first saffron robe, which he had donned almost with a sense of relief. It was he who had told him the way.

'You have taken the first step on your journey,' he said, as dark hair fell

to the floor. He half expected the hairs to shatter, so frosted with ice were they. ‘We will give you instruction, we will give you chores. We will show you the path. It is up to you to walk it.’

The initiate merely nodded, risking a cut, but the Young Master’s hands were skilled at his work. His own shiny smooth head paid witness to that.

‘If you stay long enough, you will be given opportunity to ask one question of the Old Master. Until then, you will not address him unless he addresses you.’

Again, the initiate nodded.

‘Ours is a strict order. You will not stay long.’

‘We shall see,’ replied the initiate.

In his first ten years, the initiate excelled in all he was taught, except one thing. After the evening meal and before the sun dipped behind the mountain peaks, the Young Master would teach him one of the ancient forms of defence.

For one turn of the hour glass, the Young Master would demonstrate the day’s moves, pointing to each of the body’s pressure points in turn. Then the initiate would repeat the actions, perfect in every detail. However, when it came to putting the lessons into practise, he failed most miserably.

The pattern was set from the very first lesson. The Young Master would begin the attack, and the initiate would block it perfectly. If he had followed through with a suitable counter-attack, the match would have been over within

seconds. But he never did. Each time he would back away and allow the Young Master time to regain his feet again and attack. And again he would block, expertly. The match would continue that way each night until, out of frustration and sheer exhaustion, the Young Master would be forced to concede.

Often after these matches, the Young Master - who considered the initiate as close a friend as one could make within the confines of the Order - would question him about his fighting style, but he never received an answer until, one day, the Old Master happened upon one of the endless matches.

‘Why, honourable one,’ asked the wizened old man, ‘do you never attack?’

The initiate, once he had received the correct permission from the Young Master, replied:

‘I need not attack my opponent to defeat him, Master. It is enough that I can defend myself and others from him.’

The Old Master had nodded and, supported on either side by his aides, had returned to his chamber. And the match had continued.

Five years after that, the Young Master had come to the initiate with a bowl of stark broth and news.

‘My friend,’ he said, ‘the Master will take your question now.’

The initiate had been led in silence by the Old Master’s number two aide through to his chamber. The air with thick with incense, and the sound of

the howling wind echoed behind the walls. The Old Master himself sat at the end of the room, as he had when the initiate had first come to him. He seemed unchanged by the passing years, his face perhaps just a little more lined than it had been before. Perhaps not.

To his left, stood a golden statue of Master Buddha. The initiate bowed.

‘Ask your question,’ instructed the Master.

The initiate looked up at him with clouded grey eyes and asked:

‘Who am I?’

And the Master looked sad, as his only answer was:

‘Alas, I cannot answer that.’

That was the first time of asking.

After that, there was no more instruction that could be given to the initiate. Normally, one who had been through all that he had and had seen the Old Master would return from that chamber a monk. There had been no announcement, yet all the monks still referred to him as the initiate.

It fell to him to provide his own instruction.

Five years after the first meeting, the Young Master found himself watching his friend. He himself was no longer so young, and yet as difficult as it was to tell with the absence of hair, he was sure that the initiate hadn’t aged

a day since he had arrived. He decided that day, as politely as possible, to broach the subject.

When asked, the initiate had replied with a story the Young Master had never heard before.

‘Once,’ he began, ‘there had been a spirit - a djinn unfettered by thoughts of evil and greed. This djinn roamed the realms, seeking injustice and putting it to rights. Then, one day, this djinn found himself imprisoned and banished from the mortal realm, never to return.’

The Young Master nodded sagely. It was not an uncommon practice with djinns.

‘Yet soon this djinn awoke to find himself released and back on the mortal plane. But, when he awoke, there were no mortals around saying “Here! Djinn! I have summoned you and I demand my three wishes!” There was no-one except the djinn and his universe. This worried him. He had always known from whence he came, and thus he had known who he was, behind the flesh. Yet now he didn’t know from whence he came, nor did he know who had summoned him. He did not know who he was. And when the next injustice came - as they always do - he did not fight it, because he did not know it was his place to fight.’

So the Young Master shook his head in sympathy, still unsure of what had been said to him. But, to his credit, he never asked again.

And when ten years passed from that day, there was no

announcement, yet the initiate knew it was his time of asking again. Again he went to the chamber, and again he was led into it by the number two aide. This year, however, it was a different number two aide: the last had died two years previously of a particularly mean flu.

When the initiate came to the incense filled room, he saw that things had changed. The Old Master was a frail sack of bones barely held together by his spirit. His skin was wrinkled and drawn in like cheap fabric, and the eyes that looked at him where milky white.

‘Ask,’ he croaked, his voice barely audible.

And again the initiate asked:

‘Who am I?’

This time, the Old Master had not the strength to reply so instead turned his face away to show he had no answer to give. And so the initiate left the great chamber again, his heart in his ankles.

That was the second time of asking.

The next year, the Old Master died.

The ceremony was long and respectful, going on for three days and three nights, and for all this time not food nor water passed the initiate’s lips. Neither did he sleep. Nobody asked why. They all knew.

After the ceremony, there were no more masters. Again, there was no announcement, and yet from that day on nobody addressed the initiate’s

friend and mentor as the Young Master any more. For a year and a day, the great chamber lay empty, filled only by the spirits of the dead.

The day after that, the chamber was filled with incense and the initiate's mentor took residence as the Old Master. No new Young Master came to take his place.

Thirteen years after that came the third time of asking.

Again without announcement, the initiate arrived outside the doors to the great chamber. Again, a new number two aide arrived to lead him inside and, again, the air was heavy with incense. It was the Old Master who was different.

This younger Master who had grown old before the initiate's eyes, while he himself stayed young as the day arrived. The wrinkles lined his face like a map of his life, but the eyes that sparkled out were the same that always had. The golden Buddha sat on his left, approvingly.

'My friend,' greeted the Old Master.

The initiate bowed.

'Ask your question.'

And for the third time, the initiate asked:

'Who am I?'

And for the first time, he got his answer.

The Old Master smiled warmly, and reached down beside his throne.

From out behind the Buddha, he pulled out a thick flat square that he handed to the initiate. He took it, reverently, and gave the Old Master a questioning look. The old man merely smiled. Without a word, the initiate looked at the square.

For the first time in forty-five years, he smiled.

‘Yes,’ he said, and handed back the mirror.

And when he left the chamber, although there had been no announcement, all addressed him as Young Master.

The very next day, the monastery gathered to bid farewell to the Young Master.

The weather was foul - thick snow blurred the land only a few feet in front of your face, and a cold wind howled in your ear like a pack of starving wolves - and yet still the Old Master left his chamber to bid farewell.

A fire was lit in the courtyard, a roaring inferno that lit the sky for miles around, melting the snow before it even touched the flames, warming even the coldest spirit on that harsh day. It was lit so that the Old Master could find his way back, alone.

Together, without aides to help them, the two friends walked out through the wooden gate and into the storm.

In the middle of the storm, with the fire just visible behind them, the two men stopped. They took each other’s hands, the young and the old, the smooth and the lined, and held on as if they were a life-line.

‘Goodbye, Master,’ said the Young Master.

‘Goodbye, friend,’ replied the old man.

And they let go of their hands, and the Old Master watched his friend walk through the storm to a jade pagoda perched comically on the edge of the mountain. With a last look behind him, the Young Master entered, and then the pagoda was gone. Perhaps it had been buried by the snow. Perhaps not.

The Old Master headed back to the monastery, and from that day on, the Order never had another Young Master.

Wolsey the Hunter abandoned his struggles after half an hour, contented. He had struck out at the walls that lost his scent so quickly, but it had only hurt his claws so he was resigned to finding another way to defeat them. Perhaps spreading his scent far and wide, so that they would tire of the constant work? But not now. Now it was time for the hunter to rest.

He found his way back to the wardrobe room easily, and brushed past the Doctor as he made his way towards a warm looking pile of jumpers. The Doctor ignored him - a slight twinge of annoyance, but not worthy of a clawing just yet. He seemed to be busy. Once he was settled, Wolsey watched the Doctor reverently hanging a pale orange robe on a rack all of its own through slanted eyes.

If he noticed that the Doctor had lost the strangely coloured fur off his head, he didn’t deign it worth interrupting his sleep for.

THE HOUSE AT LITTLE SARFIELD

Little Sarfield: 4. November, 1894

13:15

From a distance he was little more than a single white speck amongst the granite, unmoving, unremarkable. The graveyard was so big, and he so small, that he was lost in a sea of cold stone slabs and lush green grass. Here and there, flowers bloomed: daisies pushing up through verdant soil, dandelions raised their heads to the sky, roses entwined with the stones. He ignored them, just as the rest of the graveyard ignored him. They were so small, such a tiny speck of life, that they simply didn't register. As, from a distance, neither did he.

It was only when you moved closer that he became of interest: his eyes so cold and grey, so fixed and unblinking; his face so lined and careworn; his

hands gripping his unopened umbrella as if it contained salvation. He was the only patch of colour against his slate surroundings, and yet even here he did not seem vibrant. The graveyard seemed to drain the colour from his cheeks, the twinkle from his eye. Even the red of his umbrella's handle seemed mute and drab. The hat that sat perched on his head failed to do so at a jaunty angle, and lips that so wanted to break into an infectious grin resolutely refused. Nothing would break his mood, his concentration.

Somewhere, crows laughed harshly. He paid them no heed.

The object of his attentions lay prostrate at his feet, covered in weeds and long grass. She was beautiful, although it wasn't that which drew him to her. Her skin was pale and dry, but without blemish, covered in the softest chiffon, billowing gently in a non-existent wind. Her hair cascaded down her shoulders in flowing curls, softly merging with the white feathers of her wings. Her wings – the great wings of an eagle – were at rest behind her back, but looked for all the world as if the very next second they would stretch out and carry her back to the heavens.

But this stone angel was flying nowhere today. Time had not been kind to her as she stood guard over the gravestones, and the ground had shifted beneath her feet, sending her crashing to the earth. She had barely survived the fall, beautifully inert, proud in the face of her suffering.

And he looked down on her, his face equally inert, equally proud, and thought thoughts that were entirely his own.

'Subsidence,' she said, suddenly beside him.

He didn't look. He knew what he would see. A young girl, so nearly a

woman, dressed black as night and quite possibly with a disapproving look in her hazel eyes. He didn't need that. Not now. He could disapprove quite enough for the two of them. He'd had years of practice.

'And since the grave was put in,' she said again. 'Either that or they'd been at the communion wine when they put that statue up.'

Silence. Still silence.

'Professor?'

He turned his cold grey gaze on her then. For just a moment, she felt the weight of the centuries press down on her. Thousands of choices made, and regretted? The cold eyes failed to transmit that much. But he looked at her, and he didn't see what he feared. There was only worry, and love, and trust.

As she watched, a spark fired deep in his grey eyes. He smiled gently, and tapped a playful finger across her nose. She grinned back. The Doctor was definitely in.

'Penny for them?' she asked softly.

He looked back to the angel, his eyes meeting hers for a moment. She stared impassively through him, indignant.

'There's a grave under there,' he said quietly, his Scots burr softening the sound. 'One hundred years old, and no-one left to cut the grass.'

Ace looked at him, squinting against the midday sun. With a steel-tipped toe she pushed the heaviest of the weeds aside, to reveal a flat granite slab face up on the ground. Stubborn thistles still obscured the top half, but the weatherworn writing on the bottom could still just be made out: *And also*, it

said, *Ruth Ann*, *Great-granddaughter*. And below that: *born asleep*.

‘Poor kid,’ Ace breathed.

‘Indeed,’ said the Doctor, darkly.

Ace pushed aside some more of the weeds with her hands, kneeling down to study the gritty stone from underneath a frown. Something struck her, and she said:

‘There’s no date.’

‘No.’

‘Isn’t that unusual?’

The Doctor looked again. The angel stared back, blankly, as if daring him to question her.

‘I suppose so,’ he answered.

Ace turned away from her search to look up at the Doctor. Despite his short stature, he seemed to tower over her. So solid, so unmoving, so *sure*: there were times when it seemed to Ace that he was the statue, looking down on her with stone cold, unblinking eyes. Perhaps if she grabbed him, held him, and stared deep into those eyes, she might see something that would tell her, something . . . just *something*.

‘What?’ she asked instead.

‘I was just thinking,’ he said softly. Ace remained quiet, hoping he would say more. ‘There are no children on Gallifrey. No real ones. Time Lords are born sterile.’

Ace kept looking up at him, but the words “*born asleep*” tripped quietly

through her mind.

‘That’s terrible,’ she said, firmly.

‘Yes,’ the Doctor said. Or, at least, that was what Ace heard him say.

Ace pulled herself to her feet and brushed the clinging greenery from her black clad legs. Brushing her skirt back into place, she looked at the Doctor. He didn’t seem like he was ready to move, and wouldn’t be for at least another century. She folded her arms across her chest and looked at him like a disappointed mother.

‘They’re waiting for us,’ she said. ‘Are you coming? The ceremony’s already started.’

‘We don’t have to go,’ he said, avoiding her eyes. ‘We could just slip away. I know a planet where the skies are pink and the seas orange. Or is it the other way around? We could go and check.. We could –’

‘Come on,’ Ace said, ‘or we’ll miss it.’

The Doctor stopped, seeming to deflate.

‘I’ll be there soon,’ he said.

‘Professor –’

‘I’ve just never been good at this sort of thing. Go on.’

With a last look, Ace shrugged her hands into her pockets and wandered away the way she had come, weaving through the myriad of stones. The Doctor didn’t watch her go. He didn’t need to: he’d seen it before, he’d see it again. He knew it wouldn’t start yet, not without him: the guest of honour. His eyes fell instead on the gravestone, quietly resting in its shroud of

greenery. With the tip of his umbrella he pushed aside the last of the weeds, to reveal the inscription: *Susan*. And below that: *Beloved Granddaughter.*

With a last unreadable glance, he turned away, to follow Ace towards the remembrance ceremony.

ONE

"*He who abandons the nest,*

Must expect the cuckoo."

Martian Proverb.

Newcastle-upon-Tyne: 5. March, 2000

07:25

Chile was just splashing cold water over his face – trying to wash away the dust of another day on the road -–when the telephone rang. He regarded it with cold brown eyes, treating it to the distaste he saved for all things technological. He didn't trust them, these new inventions, these *machines* that were meant to make his life easier, but only seemed to add increasingly new and varied complications to it. The last machine he'd held in his hand had been a flintlock, and that had been nearly four hundred years ago. Since then,

he'd walked a different path, away from these inventions, these tools designed to stop people talking to people, to stop them seeing the world outside, the true nature of creation.

He glared into the mirror, fixing his reflection with a look of utter contempt. The coffee skinned, rat faced traveller glared back, trying to convince him to ignore the buzzing little creature. But that was the problem: the machines were too insistent, their calls pitched like a baby's cry, irritating all who heard it into doing all they could to silence it. Half-toying with a thousand different ways of silencing it, Chile reached out with a slender hand and whipped the receiver from its cradle.

'Mr Walker?' the child from hotel reception, barely old enough to grow stubble.

'This is Walker,' he growled into the telephone.

'A didn't wake y', did a, Mr Walker? Only y' friend said it was urgent, like.'

'My friend?'

'Y've got a letter, Mr Walker. Hand delivered an all.'

This was strange. He had only stopped in the hotel on his way further North, needing rest for the night. He wasn't intending stopping long that morning, just long enough to eat a hearty breakfast and scrape last night's mud from his boots: there was urgent business waiting for him, and a large payment coming his way when it was complete. No-one could guess he was there – he hadn't known he'd be stopping himself until the early hours of that morning, when the rain became too heavy to walk through. He had told no-

one what he was doing or where he was going – he had no-one to tell – but somehow someone had found him.

His first instinct was to slam the telephone down, turn and run. He was cautious by nature – not from fear for his life, more from a desire to keep his secrets his own – and his instincts had long been honed to avoid unnecessary complications. And yet, his curiosity had been roused, demanded sating.

‘Bring it to me,’ he said, knowing he would regret it later.

‘Right y’are, Mr Walker,’ the youth said, obviously more than a little curious himself.

‘One more thing,’ Chile added, softly.

‘Aye, Mr Walker?’

‘Never use the telephone to speak to me again,’ he growled, and crashed the receiver back into its cradle before he had to listen to the receptionist’s confused acknowledgement.

He dressed quickly, throwing on his battered black trousers, crumpled brown shirt, dusty grey jacket in less time than it too the receptionist to use the lift. He felt a pang of guilt as he pulled on his high-backed walking boots, knowing that he should take the time to clean them, knowing that he couldn’t spare the time. It was a shame: the one thing he had the hardest time finding was decent walking boots. It always seemed that just as they felt their most comfortable, that was the moment they would get too old for use. Like Chile himself. No matter, he would clean them at his next stop, in a couple of days.

He picked up his knapsack, threw it over his shoulder, scanning the room quickly to see if he had left anything. Of course, he hadn’t. Everything he

owned was in his bag, and he hadn't taken it out last night, simply fell onto the bed and slept. He strode across the small room and flung the window open: better to be prepared, just in case. If the letter proved to be dangerous, it could be slung into the morning without too much trouble. Let the early risers below deal with the problem.

As he stood there, looking down on the Tyne Bridge, stretching across the dirty scar of the river, there came a knock at the door.

'Enter,' he said, moving away from the window.

The door swung open, and there stood the receptionist: red haired and broad shouldered, a child who could barely be over thirty. In his hands was a plain white envelope, large enough to contain anything.

'A brought y' letter, Mr Walker, like y' said,' he beamed, obviously hoping for another tip. Walker was only to disappoint him.

'Show me,' he said, not moving to take it.

A confused look on his face, the receptionist held the letter up for inspection. The envelope was thick, but plain, his name printed dead centre in a neat hand that he didn't recognise. Then the receptionist twisted it, showing him the reverse, and Chile knew he should have ignored it. The envelope was sealed with a glob of wax, a seal pressed into it while it was drying. He recognised the design, the twisting knot that signified the Housekeeper of the House of Lungbarrow. He had seen it too often before.

'Open it,' he instructed, already knowing what he would find.

The receptionist did, looking inside incredulously.

'There's no letter, Mr Walker,' Chile merely nodding. 'There's just these

little bits o' plastic. A don't get –'

Chile strode back across the room, took the six squares from him. They were cool and white against his dark skin, and brought back old memories. As soon as they were in his hand, they started glowing with a faint luminescence, pulsing to some unknown rhythm of their own. Walker caught the receptionists eyebrows raise, and held back a grin as he thought what he would make of what was coming. There was something quite amusing about the look people got in their eyes when they suddenly realised the world was a bigger place than their little lives, that it held countless wonders they were too blind to see.

The six squares began to shift and move of their own accord in Chile's hand, and the receptionist's jaw dropped.

'How're y' doin' that?'

But Chile's mind was elsewhere, the pieces in his hand joined to form a perfect cube, the thoughts inside leaking into his head. As he the receptionist watched, a thick frown started to form on Walker's head, his eyes falling back into his head. He was just considering bolting, forgetting his tip – his job, even – and just getting home, never thinking about it again, when Chile's eyes flicked back open. The frown, however, remained.

'I need a pen and a piece of paper,' he growled.

'On the desk, Mr Walker. Complementary, like.'

'Stay there. I have a letter I need you to deliver.'

'Is everything alright, Mr Walker?' he asked, stuttering.

Chile fixed him with a grim stare, said:

'Yes. I have to go back to Little Sarfield.'

The receptionist had never heard of the place, but something in the way Walker said it made him think that was no bad thing. No matter how often he looked back on that strange morning, not once did he wish he had gone with the mysterious guest. There were some things it was safer not to see.

Little Sarfield: 15. March, 2000

01:46

In the darkness, Rosemary slept, troubled by dreams she'd only half remember in the morning.

Trees raced by, faster than he could count, raced behind him before he'd even registered their presence, not even sure how he managed to dodge them all, with one eye constantly on the dark behind him. Not that he would let the trees slow him, any more than he did the shrubs and brambles that constantly whipped at him as he ran, or the bitter wind that tore straight through his pyjamas to stretch gooseflesh tight across his body. He felt stupid for not bringing a coat, putting something more warm on, but who else would have? It gave him no time to think, no time to wonder whether it was real, or just some wild dream. It had just been there, luring him. Out to the creature.

Something large, fast, crashed through the trees behind him, never losing his trail for even a second.

He found himself wishing it was a dream. He'd had it over and over

again when he was younger: worried about starting school his mum said. Waking up in bed, finding himself in the woods, being chased in his pyjamas. Only he knew this wasn't a dream. He wouldn't be waking up with a jolt, his mum in the doorway telling him it was alright, to go back to sleep. The cuts on his face, his legs, stung to much for that, his lungs burnt too much, his heart pounding like a drum. He wouldn't be telling the other kids at school about this one tomorrow. He wouldn't be telling anyone, if he didn't run faster, be better.

Somewhere behind him, he could hear trees bending out of its way, the very night opening up to let it pass. This was the creature that the dark was afraid of.

Bare feet pounding against bracken, dead leaves, sharp stones. Nearly dry mud, nearly dead leaves, terrified insects, crushed between his toes, working up his feet. Tattered pyjamas blowing in the breeze, whipping around his body like flails. Hair in his eyes, tears on his cheeks, teeth biting through his lip, wanting to scream out, wanting to beg for mercy, needing his father to make it go away. The hiss of the leaves was in his ears, louder than his heart, louder than the terror behind him. He knew he wasn't going to lose it, knew that he would die.

Behind him, the creature sniffed the air, tasted his blood, and it let out a long baying howl. There wasn't a man, woman or child in the village that slept easy, when that cry echoed through the woods. Everyone felt cold in the beds, felt the thrill of fear deep in their dreams, fought against the bedclothes, clawing at the air. But only Tommy Wiggett had to run from the beast, had to run for his life, only him. That night.

And in her bed, Rosemary twisted, pawing the sheets with weak hands, her dreams dark, deep, cold. If you asked her in the morning, she'd tell you she didn't dream, didn't remember them. But she'd be looking through you when she said it, looking into a blood black night.

Little Sarfield: 15. March, 2000

15:15

She was the only person in the library who could consider herself to be in the middle years of life. Everybody around her was either under twenty (swotting for some upcoming GCSE, or reading avidly about the hungry caterpillar while mummy did the shopping) or over sixty (working their way through the latest Mills and Boon, taking the only opportunity they'd get for a quiet natter). She didn't talk to anybody, barely even glanced up from the newspapers in front of her. When she did, it was either to swig tea from a lurid tartan thermos, or to scribble a brief note on the pad in front of her. The pad was already bursting with notes, neat earnest writing, both sides of the page, slotted in any which way they could. In her bag, she had another four notebooks, all the same, all full.

So engrossed was she, she barely even noticed the Librarian stood behind her, her arms piled high with more papers, a few dusty history books, not even when she coughed politely. Not until she tried to read over her

shoulder, see just what was hidden inside the tiny loops and spirals, did she turn round and offer her an ever so warm smile.

‘You got my papers,’ she said, still beaming widely. Any more of this, and her jaw would be black and blue in the morning.

The Librarian smiled right back, her eyes grey and empty. They matched her cardigan, shade for shade.

‘And those books on local history you’d asked me about yesterday, Miss Wakeling,’ she said, voice husky from lack of use.

She held the Librarian up with a single hand, resisting the temptation to wink.

‘Please, Miss Farquharson, call me Tori.’

The Librarian giggled like a twelve year old, put a hand to her thin chest.

‘Then you must call me Judith, Tori.’

‘If you insist, Judith,’ Tori smiled, again.

‘And do let me know if there’s anything else I can get you. Tea, coffee . . ?’

Tori patted her thermos, said:

‘I’m fine, really, Judith.’

The Librarian started edging away, desperately aware that she wasn’t particularly needed nor wanted, but still hoping she could make that last favourable impression on her guest. After all, it wasn’t often she got a real life writer into her library, was it? They were both grinning like love struck

teenagers as Judith said to Tori:

‘Well, I’m only just over here.’

‘Thank you, really,’ said Tori, judging the Librarian a safe distance enough away to turn back to her notes. Her smile flicked off instantly, but Judith never saw.

‘Any time, any time,’ she mumbled heading back to her desk, and a queue of acned youths wanting to take out more than their fair share. A Librarian’s work was never done.

Tori, however, dove straight back into her work, devouring every page of both the locals and the nationals the library kept in their archive. Searching for even just one word that might be relevant. Of course, she’d fibbed ever so slightly to the Librarian. When she’d first come in and asked to see the paper archive, the old dear had immediately clamed up: a fatal combination of an outsider’s accent (and a London accent, no less) and questions about the Child Catcher, as the papers had dubbed him, had nearly done for her enquiries. She smelt journalist, no doubt. It was only when she’d casually mentioned she was writing a history book about the area for Methuen that blessed Judith had become oh so helpful. Helpful to the point of sycophancy, to the point where every returned smile was making her face ache, her lips threaten to split. Still, it had got her more help than the truth would have.

Actually, I’m here to kill the owner of the House up on the hill there, Judith, and if you could get me a fresh coffee that would be great. Thanks so much (broad grin).

No, she didn’t think that particular piece of information would go down

too well, and so the book had been born. And it was almost a pity that she wasn't writing it: the only thing the library seemed to have were two dusty tomes – one from 1750 and one from 1875. That left a bit of a gap in her researches, she had to admit. She'd have to try and butter up Judith, see if she couldn't recommend some more useful texts, even the local old battleaxe story teller to go and bend the ear of. Places like this, they always had history, and people willing to tell it for the price of a pint or two.

Reaching carefully into her bag for a fresh notebook, taking great care not to reveal the revolver hidden carefully under a ring binder, Tori started a fresh page with a new heading: The House at Little Sarfield. Underlining it carefully, she started reading the first book, and scribbling wild notes with her free hand. She was so engrossed, she didn't even manage to smile when Judith happened to toss an ever-ready-to-help chuckle her way.

It was all Murphy could do to stop the poor woman dissolving into tears there and then in the station. It didn't help matters much that the "station" was little more than a shack out by the railway line, and that in precisely seventeen minutes – if Virgin could still be counted on – the next train to Derby would be rattling the windows out of their frames. Despite the fact that he'd weathered his first year in the village without any major disasters, despite the fact he was Sarfield born and bred, the villagers still mistrusted him, still thought he was something of a clockwork orange left on their doorstep overnight. Having the shabbiest office in the history of policing didn't help. Nor did his continued lack

of success with “The Child Catcher”.

‘Please,’ Murphy said softly. ‘I know this is difficult, but if you could just tell me exactly what happened.’

‘What happened?’ the woman, Mary Wiggett, fixed him with two red ringed eyes, teeth set to try and lock in the sobs. ‘He took my Thomas. Little Thomas.’

And there was no prize for guessing who. Whenever the village’s assembled mothers talked about *him*, they meant the Catcher. And *he* was all the mothers were talking about, this last year.

‘Okay, Mary, that’s okay,’ he reached out a hand, rested it on her shoulder. She shrugged it off, glaring at him.

‘Tell me you’re going to tell the police this time, Sergeant,’ she practically spat his rank out: he could see it sitting on his desk, disgusting little “Sergeant” that it was.

‘I am the police, Mrs Wiggett,’ he said, already hearing the conversation in his head. I meant . . .

‘I meant the *real* police, in the city,’ Wiggett snapped, teeth gnashing against teeth. ‘I hope you’ll tell them, so they’ll send us someone to put a stop to him.’

‘I’m here to put a stop to him, Mrs Wiggett. My commanding officer at Greater Sarfield is kept constantly aware of the situation in the village, and he has the greatest confidence in me,’ or so he says, rather than spend the overtime budget on the hicks in the village, thought Murphy, but kept admirably quiet.

A quiet little retirement patch, it had been sold to him as. Your home turf, easy street. The Chief Super had called him into his office – what? Nearly two years ago now – and told him that Nathan Preston was retiring. Little Sarfield was his patch wasn't it? Your neck of the woods isn't it, Murphy? And he'd agreed readily, his heart already rising, already guessing what he was about to be offered. Nice quiet little patch to work out until you get the golden handshake. Nothing too stressful, familiar faces, who could refuse that, eh Murphy? Not him, that was for sure. Although sometimes . . .

'Two years you've had to catch him, Sergeant,' another spit, 'Two years and now he's got my little Tommy.'

Sergeant Murphy bristled slightly, and couldn't keep the edge out of his voice when he said:

'Eighteen months, Mrs Wiggett. The Catcher's been working the village these last eighteen months. I can give you the figure in days, if you'd prefer, or perhaps in sleepless nights I've spent trying to figure out a way to catch this bastard.'

Of course he immediately regretted it. Any good feeling he got from lashing out, it was always paid back in spades when he saw their faces – the faces of people he'd lived and grown up with – crumple and fold, turning grey like ash, blowing away in the wind. Because no matter how angry they got, they weren't angry with him, but the little thief who stole their video, or the joy rider who wrapped a Ford round their herbaceous border. Or the Catcher. Yes, they were all angry with the Catcher. There'd be a lot of folks sleeping easier in their beds when he was caught, Murphy himself just the least of

them.

‘I’m sorry, Mary, really,’ he spread his hands to her, a reconciliation. ‘Why don’t you try and tell me exactly what happened, and I’ll head out and see if anybody’s seen him.’

And Mary Wiggett nodded, all the fight gone out of her. She was just as old and tired as the rest of us, thought Murphy. Old and tired and scared. Wondering who’ll be next.

‘There’s still a chance he might be hiding out somewhere, paying you back for not letting him watch – what was it? Red Dwarf, that was his favourite, wasn’t it?’

Wiggett nodded, a slight smile on her face. But they both knew they were kidding each other. It had happened too often, these last eighteen months, always the same story. Vanished without any sign of a struggle, no body ever found. It was a hell of a thing to watch his village slowly whittled away like this, the children of children his Peter had gone to school with. The only thing that stopped him throwing it all in, taking the watch early, was the fact that he couldn’t bare to let anybody else mess this up. The Catcher had to be caught, and soon, and if he was the only man willing to put in that extra ten percent to do it, then so be it. Whatever it took.

‘Okay, Mary,’ he said, pencil at the ready, ‘from the beginning.’

As the Doctor strode purposefully down the lane, his umbrella marking time on the gravel road, Ace took the opportunity to watch him, closely. Not

with her eyes, of course – it tended to make the Doctor nervous when she spent hours staring at her – but with Wolsey's, who was rolling down the hill behind them, occasionally getting distracted by mice or birds that strayed foolishly into his field of view.

It was strange, but Ace just couldn't get enough of looking at him, this new him, this old him, all flashing eyes and grins and dapper new wardrobe. He looked so . . . so much like he used to, she supposed. Before the Cheetahs. There wasn't the wall in his eyes any more, that shield that he'd hidden his anxieties behind, before. All there was now were the usual old secrets, those that he'd carried with him from the cradle, and would take with him to the grave. It felt good to have him back, after the last year, with no-one but Wolsey and her ghosts.

She'd nearly died when he turned up on the beach, a thousand different thoughts flashing through her mind in one. Was this an earlier Doctor, Mel's Doctor, bumped into her by accident? Or some double, wandering round pretending like that film her Mum liked so much. Or had she cracked? Had it all got too much for her: she'd travelled to find herself, but instead had she lost herself entirely? Wolsey didn't trust him either – he was disturbed by the change in his scent. It took Ace quite some time to realise that it was because he didn't have the tang of a Cheetah clinging to him, the same smell she got so used to coming from her that she barely even noticed it. Wolsey had never scented the Doctor before, of course, and Ace hadn't paid it much attention either. Then all that stuff with the Potatoheads had kicked off, and there couldn't be any doubt. This was him, her Doctor, back again. From the dead.

And as Wolsey watched from behind them, the Doctor, her Doctor, waved at the Kitling behind their backs.

‘You don’t have to keep an eye on me, Ace,’ he said, eyes down on the valley. ‘I’m not going anywhere. Not this time.’

And she grinned, feeling part guilty, part relieved. Yeah, this was her Doctor: he could read her like a book.

He stopped suddenly, throwing his arms out wide and taking in the whole hillside.

‘There,’ he said, that glint in his eyes.

Ace looked, and saw the House looming up in front of them, the trees huddling round it, trying to hide it.

‘What’re we doing back here? You’re not planning another Bolognese, are you? I’m still working off the last one.’

‘Not this time, Ace,’ he said, and she could practically see the plan forming in his mind. Plan for what, she had no idea, but she didn’t doubt she’d find out soon enough. When all Hell started to break loose.

‘What, then?’

‘Unfinished business, Ace,’ the Doctor said, his eyes darkening. ‘Unfinished business. Come on.’

And he set off again, leaving Ace and Wolsey to catch him up.

For a second or two, Ace didn’t move. She stood perfectly still, looking up at the House through two pairs of eyes, seeing it in her head how it had been the first time. All the windows dark, the ivy refusing to grow up its walls,

the grass leaving a dirt moat all round it, making it look for all the world like the house was growing up from the ground. It looked like an old manor house, built with fortification in mind, a watch tower joining the chimneys on the roof. But it was far older than it seemed, Ace knew. She'd been inside it, felt the centuries coming from it in waves.

As she ran to catch up with the Doctor, already half way to the front door, her head was filled with pictures of that night. Chasing round the garden with a Samurai sword, running after some alien things that had turned a kitty cat into a monster. Business as usual. At least, for her and the Doctor. The couple of police that had been sent up from the city hadn't known how to deal with it. Nor had the House's caretakers, for that matter.

As Ace hurried on passed the empty caretaker's cottage, she wondered how they were getting on. She remembered the Doctor telling her they'd quit, put the gran into a home and moved on elsewhere. Not that she blamed them. Ace knew all too well what it was like trying to come to terms with finding your body suddenly alien, suddenly capable of things that amaze you, scare you. She couldn't blame them at all.

'Come on, Ace,' the Doctor called, stood at the door, searching his new tweed jacket's pockets for the front door key. 'We've got work to do.'

Yeah, business as usual.

As she reached his side, the Doctor pulled the key triumphantly from his pocket, broad grin cracking his face. It was a huge iron monster, iron teeth crooked and gaping: Ace wondered how he carried it around without it weighing down his coat, but then the amount of stuff he seemed able to cart

around in there, would he notice if she dropped a dumbbell in there? He was just about to push the key into the lock when something strange happened. The door swung open.

‘Yes?’ said the woman in the doorway, and Ace’s heart leapt into her throat.

She looked harmless enough – old and thin, but looking like she could still do her fair share of grunt work. Her hair was a cold steel grey, tied back into a bun on the back of her head, her eyes clear and blue. She was dressed neat and starched, but Ace somehow got the impression it made her uncomfortable. She smiled sweetly at the Doctor and Ace, and the young woman noticed she was missing a couple of teeth.

The Doctor recovered first – as always – his grin faltering for a second, then turning full on, teeth practically blinding. She noticed that he managed to palm the key with one swift motion, the stranger never even noticing it. He still had it.

‘How do you do?’ he said, doffing his hat, taking the opportunity to slip the front door key inside his Panama hat. ‘I’m the Doctor, and this is my friend, Ace.’

‘You’ll be wanting rooms, I guess?’ she said, stepping out of the doorway, letting them look inside.

Everything was scrupulously clean, as always, but things had changed since the last time Ace had been there. The stairway had been re-carpeted, a rich crimson velvet, and the door to the armoury was locked with a large padlock. But the most obvious change was the reception desk inserted just

next to the stairs, a row of pigeon holes and room keys nailed up behind them. Ace saw a flicker of distaste flash across the Doctor's face, and then vanish. Ever the professional.

'Rooms?' he asked, innocently.

'Rooms. You are looking for the guest house, aren't you?' she asked, an eyebrow arching slowly.

The Doctor and Ace exchanged glances.

'The guest house,' the Doctor echoed.

Ace got the impression things weren't going exactly to plan.

TWO

Little Sarfield: 15. March, 2000

16:01

‘This one’ll be yours, me duck,’ the old woman said, pointing to the guest bedroom. Ace knew it was the guest bedroom: she’d stayed there before. Without having to pay for the privilege.

Not that the old dear was anything but likeable: she had an air of casual disrespect that Ace couldn’t help but admire. Whether it was the little shrug of resignation she’d given when – on being told “No pets, love” – Wolsey had simply turned tail and head for the caretaker’s cottage, or the way she’d immediately asked the Doctor whether they’d be needing two singles or a double, with a look of such innocence on her face that she just *had* to be asking out of good old fashioned curiosity. Not the normal disapproving

snootiness she'd come to expect from her ilk: one thing Ace had seen over the past year was the inside of a multitude of guest rooms, each with their own specific brand of keeper. And she hadn't done the raised eyebrows who're-you-trying-to-kid-mister when the Doctor had asked for two singles – an occupational hazard of being her age and travelling with somebody the Doctor's age (or even the age the Doctor currently looked like he was) was that no-one would believe you were just friends. Telling them she was his niece didn't seem to help, either. Not that the Doctor ever noticed. Ace was convinced that he was just like an Action Man when it came to that kind of thing: get his clothes off him, and you'd just find a pair of blue underpants welded to his crotch.

The old woman – Rosemary, she'd introduced herself as the Doctor and Ace scraped their jaws off the front step – had taken them through to the little reception desk erected by the stairs and asked them both to sign in, while the Doctor glanced around for all the world as if seeing the place for the first time. He'd really missed his calling: the universe's gain was the RSC's loss. Or vice versa, depending on your point of view. He'd cooed appreciatively to Ace about the wood-panelling, the carpets, even going so far as to point through to the dining room and its huge mahogany table.

'This is a beautiful place you've got here, Miss . . ?' the Doctor had said, letting the sentence hang in the air.

'Just Rosemary,' the old woman had answered, either not rising to the bait, or not even seeing the worm.

'But this desk. Obviously not part of the original fittings, wouldn't you

say, Ace?'

'Definitely,' she'd said, playing her part beautifully.

'Wherever did you get it?'

Rosemary hadn't even batted an eyelid. She just rested a palm on the smooth Formica top as if she was just as proud as the Doctor of the hideous thing, and said:

'Got it from IKEA,' there was a glint in her eye, a grin spreading over her face. 'Walked right in and paid for it myself, in cash. Sign here, and here.'

The Doctor's pen had danced briefly, leaving his spider's-crawl signature in the big red book. He didn't even pause to see what his hand was doing, just carried on regardless with his fishing trip.

'Well, it's definitely a desk to be proud of, Rosemary,' he relished the Rs in her name ever so slightly, unable to stop himself no doubt. 'Solid top, sturdy construction –'

He floundered slightly, his hand waving vaguely in the air. Ace leapt in to his rescue.

'Nice colour.'

'Nice colour, yes,' the Doctor agreed, back on a roll. 'And still looking fresh from the factory.'

And then she bit, and all the Doctor had to do was reel her in.

'Well, me duck, there's no shock in that, is there? It's only been there six months.'

'Six months?' the Doctor echoed. Ace could see the calculator in his

head spring into action. From the look on his face, she could tell he'd got the same answer as her.

'We're new, but we're gonna be around some time, don't you worry,' she'd said, pride inflating her thin frame. 'Few years, you won't be able to move for guests round here.'

The Doctor had kept at her as she'd led them up the staircase to their rooms, every little comment designed to draw out some seemingly innocent response from her. No matter what she said – even the crack about her arthritis – Ace knew the Doctor would be taking it in, even when he looked like he was far more engrossed in the flock on the walls, or what the particular shade of the carpet was called. He'd file it all away somewhere in that labyrinthine mind of his, never knowing exactly what might prove significant later on. As far as Ace could tell, most of it was irrelevant, but the Doctor nodded and ah-ed like she was telling him where the source of the Nile could be found.

It was only as they reached the top of the stairs that the Doctor had let the mask slip a little, heading by force of habit for the master bedroom with its four poster bed and walk in wardrobe.

'Nice try, love, but it's no good. That's taken,' Ace could see the Doctor cursing himself for the slip. 'This one'll be yours, me duck.'

And he'd been redirected to the smaller of the two guest room: a simple small bed and a tiny wardrobe, both looked – to Ace's eye – like the product of another trip to IKEA. The Doctor smiled politely, and doffed his hat.

'You've been here before, then,' Rosemary said, handing the Doctor a

clean towel and a bar of soap.

‘Ah, yes,’ said the Doctor sheepishly, the little boy with his hand in the biscuit barrel. ‘Am I that transparent?’

‘Nah,’ she said, grinning back. ‘It wasn’t for the way you made straight for the good room, I’d never know. Not an old guest, I know. You a friend of Jacob’s?’

‘Jacob?’ the Doctor asked innocently. Ace hovered in the doorway, watching the master at work.

‘The owner. Take that as a no, then.’

‘No, I can’t say we do. My friend and I are something of amateur historians. We’ve had an interest in this House for some time now. We looked in some time ago. Before it became a guest house. It had a different owner.’

And Rosemary’s face had gone hard, and she’d said sullenly:

‘Yeah, well Jacob owns it now. That one there’s yours, love. You need anything, I’m right downstairs.’

The Doctor and Ace watched her hobble down the stairs, the Doctor clutching his umbrella to his lips.

‘Well?’ he asked softly.

‘Seems nice enough. Not the mad dictator type.’

‘Hmm.’

‘But she’s still here, when she shouldn’t be. And then there’s this Jacob guy,’ a thought struck Ace. ‘You never got the urge to call yourself Jacob, did you? Settle down and run a nice family business?’

The Doctor shook his head, grin gone, eyes dark.

‘No, course not. She’s not your type anyway, right?’ she said, but she might as well be talking to herself. ‘I s’pose you got the same date I did, yeah?’

‘Hmm?’

‘Oh come on, Doctor. Six months ago. Round about the time you . . . well, all that stuff with Jötunson.’

‘Yes, it doesn’t seem rather coincidental, doesn’t it?’ he said, rapping his umbrella decisively on the floor. ‘Go and settle yourself in, Ace. I’m going downstairs.’

‘What for?’

‘I think I should see if I can’t meet with this Jacob. I think we’ve got a lot to talk about.’

And Ace found herself praying that the sudden chill on the landing was only down to new air conditioning, fresh from IKEA. Otherwise, she thought, this Jacob guy’s in a lot of bother.

Tori worked her way round to the graveyard, picking her way through overgrown bushes and discarded bottle, weaving between the weeds that poked their heads up through the gravel pathway, itself edged with long grass and detritus. Either the people in Sarfield hadn’t got God yet, or they were so busy praying that a little spring cleaning took up just too much time. The graveyard itself loomed up like a broken smile, crooked headstones leaning

this way and that on the long green grass. A few of the graves were new and well-kept, but most were crumbling monoliths, slowly decaying back into the ground.

Her eyes on the myriad of graves, Tori failed to watch her feet. Kicking something hard and cold in the grass, the world lurched up around her and the floor delivered a rough kiss on her cheek.

Perhaps if the villagers cared a little more about their dead, they could actually clean this dump up so people weren't liable to kill themselves. She pulled herself up off the ground, muttering fiercely, looking round to see if anyone had seen her stumble. There was not a soul around, only the terraced houses hunched resolutely outside the grounds, as if resenting giving the church even such little quarter. The lane outside, the pavement, hell the whole damned village in between the library and here, all were empty and quiet. Was it always like this, she wondered, or was it down to the Child Catcher?

Glancing down at what had tripped her, Tori managed to spot a crumbling stone angel prostrate in the grass. Another family neglecting their duty.

'Are you alright, miss?' came a voice from behind her, and Tori nearly jumped out of her skin.

Once her heart returned to its usual position, she turned and saw a round little figure rushing at her from out of the church. Tori got the impression that the little man was made completely from jet black velvet, soft and forgiving, but that they had skimped somewhat in the final reckoning: his shiny bald crown poked out from a ring of neat black hair, a wrinkled island. His face

was red by the time he reached her, him gasping and pulling at his dog-collar as if he was about to have a heart attack.

‘Are you alright, Father?’ Tori said, holding him firmly to stop him tumbling over in the grass. The stuff there was in there, he’d probably come back up with rabies.

The Father smiled, his face not just red from exertion.

‘That’s what I meant to ask from you,’ he panted eventually. ‘I saw your fall from the rectory.’

He waved in the vague direction of the side of the church, and Tori saw a small cottage nestled in next to the larger building, as if for warmth. She felt her own cheeks tingeing red: not enough to graze her hands, but someone had to watch her too.

‘I’m fine, thanks,’ she said, turning to give the statue a polite nudge with her toe. ‘Your lady there tried to send me over.’

‘I am sorry,’ said the blustering little man, pulling himself away from Tori to try and brush the statue away with a few taps of his toe. It remained resolute, immobile. ‘We’ve been having trouble with that recently.’

‘Gardener ran off with the poor box?’

‘No gardener,’ he admitted, shamefaced. ‘No poor box, either. Hardly any congregation, to speak of.’

Tori nodded solemnly, turned away as if to watch the thousand villagers not coming up to the church’s door. With a well-practised movement, her hand was in her bag, flicking the switch on her Dictaphone and out again before the Father even noticed what was going on. She turned back to him,

tried to sound casually concerned as she said:

‘The Catcher?’

The Father nodded softly, avoiding Tori’s eyes.

‘It doesn’t help,’ he said, and then when Tori failed to say anything else: ‘But attendance wasn’t exactly high before then, if I’m honest. People don’t need God when they’ve got East Enders.’

He laughed weakly, as if to suggest it was only a joke, but Tori could hear the edge in his voice. A church was a big building to be alone in week after week.

‘Still, there must be a fair few who don’t go anywhere they don’t have to,’ Tori asked lightly, adding: ‘No offence, I mean, Father.’

‘None taken, really. And it’s Andrew, please,’ he extended a hand. Tori took it, sitting like a wet fish in her hand.

‘Tori,’ she said, pausing expectantly.

‘Tori?’ he queried, that look already appearing on his face.

‘Short for Victoria,’ she said. And there it was, that question again. He had the same look she’d seen a thousand times before sat on his face. It wouldn’t be long.

‘What’s wrong with Vicky?’

Arggghhhhh! Every damned time!

‘Everyone always called me Tori,’ she lied, trying not to grit her teeth.

‘Oh,’ he said, as if amazed that even so simple a thing could possibly be true. ‘Well, at least we have you at the church today. Is there anything I

can help you with?'

'I wanted to have a look at your graveyard, if that's okay?'

He beamed, perhaps at last glad that somebody was taking an interest. Perhaps he was even making plans to get her to mass, maybe even Christmas and Easter sermons too. Or perhaps it was all bluster, and he was just waiting to spring the trap.

'Certainly. I'm afraid we don't have much of a plan as such,' he waved an arm over the fallen headstones, 'As you can see, most of them are still moving. But you're welcome to look for your relative's stone. It is a relative, is it?'

Time to bite the bullet, push her luck.

'No,' she said. 'I'm looking for the monument.'

Silence, a look of confusion. Reporters, trained assassins, angry watch dogs, all of them failed to emerge from a thousand hiding places in the broken ground. Perhaps they were waiting for her to really dig herself in. Or perhaps, just perhaps, nobody actually knew what she was doing.

'Oh, the Stone!' he said, practically slapping his forehead. 'Sorry, everybody round here just calls it the Stone. Another lapse, I suppose. Follow me, I'll show you.'

He led her through the maze of tumbledown gravestones and rotting flowers, Tori keeping her eyes firmly on the ground, rather than risk landing amongst the filth and rubble. She wondered how the villagers put up with this kind of rot in their own church, why no-one did anything about it. She thought that Father Andrew was going to laugh when she asked him.

‘It’s the money. We don’t get enough money to pay for a groundskeeper. I do what I can but . . . And it’s hard to convince people to donate their hard earned when the beneficiary looks like this. Vicious circle.’

‘But there must be something . . .’

Andrew held up a hand, a look of resignation on his face.

‘It’s really not worth getting upset about it. It’s just the way it is.’

Sensibly, Tori kept her mouth shut.

‘Well, here it is,’ he said, standing her right in front of the monument.

Tori smiled, recognising the cairn from the book she’d been reading in the library that afternoon. Taller than she was, the monument was made out of a thousand pieces of stone and brick, each placed together with such care and precision that they had stood undamaged these last two hundred odd years. But even here, the decay wasn’t unchecked. There was moss and ivy steadily climbing up the sides of the stones, and the plaque attached to the biggest stone was buckled and almost unreadable, the letters seemingly scratched off by the very hand of time itself. Tori bent in closer, to try and read them.

‘“In remembrance of,”’ Andrew began to recite, his eyes closed as he read the words in his memory, '“our brothers and sisters of the first village of Sarfield, destroyed in 1794.” I think that’s what it used to say.’

‘It doesn’t say what destroyed it,’ Tori mused, half to herself.

‘No,’ the Father agreed. ‘I’m not entirely sure myself.’

‘You would’ve thought it would’ve gone by now,’ Tori said, then – seeing a look of hurt flash across the Father’s face – added: ‘I mean, what

with the state of everything else.'

Then, listening to herself, she realised that probably wasn't the best thing she could've said.

'Well, to be honest, we keep an eye on the Stone,' he said, perhaps not even noticing as she tried to extract her size nine from her mouth. 'It has a benefactor. A guardian angel, I suppose.'

'Oh really?'

Andrew nodded, a grin splitting his face in two, the sun glinting off his bald pate.

'Oh yes. Organises the remembrance ceremonies every – let's see, twenty years? Pays for everything. Every twenty-five years, yes that's right. Gets quite upset if the Stone doesn't look its best, or so they tell me. So we try and keep it looking its best.'

'What's his interest, this benefactor?'

'I'm sorry?' Father Andrew looked confused: as if there could be any other motive in life but good will to all men. Perhaps this time she could be a little more tactful?

'I mean, why does he want the village remembered, per se? Why not – I don't know – why not the war?'

'Which one?'

'Either. Any. I just wondered what his interest in Sarfield was.'

'Oh,' said Andrew, 'oh. Well, I've never really met him, you understand, but . . . Well, people round here tend to say he had family in Sarfield –

ancestors, you understand. His family's been arranging the remembrance ceremony for, well longer than anyone round here can remember is all I can say. And the Smith's have had property here for the last two hundred years at least.'

'Property?' Tori said.

Andrew turned round, motioning with his hand that Tori should follow his gaze. Looking up through the overgrown trees that surrounded the grounds, up past the rows of blank eyed houses, with satellite dishes reflecting the sun into her eyes, looking up she could see the wall of the valley looming high all around them, hemming them in, trapped. She took her guide from Andrew's finger, following it with her eyes, until she saw it, dark and black against the sky, crouching as if aware it was being spied on, instincts ever sharp.

'Property,' Andrew repeated, solemnly.

And Tori stood, looking up at the house, the guest house where she was staying. The house that had ruined her life. *His* house.

As soon as Ace pushed the door to her room open, she'd seen him, spread out on the bed, looking as relaxed anything. He rolled over as she came in, revealing his belly, fixed her with his cool eyes and let out a quiet breath. Ace simply glowered at him, trying to keep her face set, trying not to grin.

'What d'you think you're doing here?' she snapped.

Wolsey merely rolled on the bed again, flicking his tail up at her. He knew she wasn't as angry as she made out, could feel her true emotions as easily as his own. He even risked clawing the duvet a little, just to test her patience. She merely perched on the corner of the bed and pulled him away from the floral fabric, stroking the fur behind his ears in that way she knew he loved. He purred softly, stretched out his claws into her legs before reclining onto her thighs. She didn't even flinch, feeling as much as he did the need to flash his claws before resting.

'You'll get me into trouble,' she said, absently.

And Wolsey merely relaxed, well aware that they were both equally capable of getting the other into trouble, and both equally capable of fighting their way out again.

As Ace sat on the bed, absently scratching the Kitling's ears, she let her eyes trail around the room. She didn't usually stay in this room, usually either taking the master bedroom or just lounging on the sofa downstairs – Christ, she hoped the sofa was still there, it was uncommonly comfy and they'd never find another like it. This was the room that usually contained the Doctor's computer – in fact, it was still here, jammed into a corner under a cloth. She could make out its bizarre shape under the cotton, see a glint of a valve catching the evening sun. She'd have to get that set back up before the night was out: no doubt there'd be some kind of donkey work for her to do on it.

Aside from the computer, there wasn't really anything left of the Doctor in the room. The desk had been moved elsewhere, and a small bed and a

bedside cabinet shipped in from God alone knew where, jammed in to the already small room. On the wall there was a print of some anonymous countryside, done in faint water colours. The sort of thing that only landlords and her mother seemed to like. Perhaps she'd take it down, as soon as she could shift Wolsey from her lap.

Her eyes fell on the window, out beyond into the grounds, the border of dark trees standing guard, making sure nobody got in, or out? At least the view was familiar. The sky was starting to darken, heavy clouds turning a soft pink hue, streaks of orange dashing across the already purple sky. Out past the trees, she could make out the basin of the village, a few lights burning in some of the windows. How many times had she seen that village, travelling with the Doctor? Travelling the wonders of the universe, but somehow always ending up right back here. What was his fascination with the Earth? With Little Sarfield?

Not that she didn't feel a little fondness for the village herself, fostered no doubt by countless nights of cocoa and Italian food in the huge kitchen downstairs. That kitchen had always looked like it could cater for more than her and the Doctor, and now it had to. Perhaps it would do the house good, a few more people to shake the dust out of the rafters. But would the Doctor see it that way? No, of course not. He'd see a mystery, an invader, and he'd step in.

Well, he was big enough and ugly enough to look after himself. He'd left her to her own devices, so she wasn't going to sit around trying to solve his mysteries for him. It was time she stretched her legs, shook the dust out of

her own rafters.

‘Come on, Wolsey,’ she said, picking the still purring Kitling up by the scruff of the neck. ‘Let’s get some fresh air.’

Rosemary piled the plates carefully onto a tray, heaping a pile of cutlery from one of the drawers next to them. Leaving the tray resting on the work surface, she went over to one of the cupboards and took a handful of napkins from inside. Cloth, not paper. Jacob had insisted. She let them sit on top of the knives and forks: the folding could wait until she was in the dining room. But she would fold them, into neat pyramids, the way Jacob had showed her, and everything would be just so.

With a quick glance again at the tray – checking she had everything – she lifted the tray and pushed through the connecting door to the dining room with her backside. The room was dark – the sun was already dipping behind the trees in the grounds – and she had to make her way to the table mostly by memory alone. Resting the tray on the table, she fumbled in her pocket for a box of matches to light the candles with. She preferred the room in candle-light: it softened all the stark lines, gave the wood panelling a warmer hue. If it were up to her, everything would be light by candles, and the world would be a soft edged place.

A crack, a whiff of sulphur, a flame dipping to the wick. The Doctor smiled at her from where he’d been sitting, in the dark, at the head of the table.

Rosemary felt her heart leap. She hadn't thought anyone was in here, and certainly not lurking around in the dark. Not that she was going to let him see her surprise: she'd seen worse things than this little man in her life. No matter what kinds of games he wanted to play, he wasn't going to win. She just smiled back, and began setting the plates for dinner.

'Sitting in the dark, me duck?' she said, not looking at him, not even making him feel that important.

'I was looking at the gardens,' he said, the candle light gleaming in his grey eyes. 'The begonias will be out in the summer, and the roses. You can't imagine how beautiful the gardens look, when everything starts to bloom.'

'You know a lot about it,' she said, concentrating on the cutlery. Knife, knife, fork, fork, spoon.

'Ah, well, I've been here before, remember,' he said, leaning forward in his chair, cradling his hands before him.

Knife, knife, fork, fork, spoon. Little men didn't come into it.

'Do you know what happened to the owner of the house?'

'Jacob's the owner.'

'Ah yes, but before him.'

'He died.'

'Yes.'

A pause, a silence. Rosemary started to think maybe she'd done something wrong, too free with her lips and not careful enough with her head.

'You did know, didn't you?' she asked, putting aside the plates for the

moment.

‘Yes, I knew.’

‘Were . . .’ to ask or not to ask. Too late now, of course. ‘Were you close.’

‘Very,’ said the Doctor, the slightest trace of a smile on his face. ‘Tell me about Jacob.’

Rosemary went back to her plates, her knives, began folding the napkins slowly and deliberately.

‘You’ll meet him yourself soon enough, me duck.’

‘Where is he today?’

‘He’s got a meeting in the village. Business. He’ll be back tonight.’

‘I’ll look forward to it,’ said the Doctor, coldly.

Rosemary put down her knives and forks and fixed the Doctor with a glare. It was her best one, perfected after years of putting up a no-nonsense, don’t even think about doing that front. Just for a moment, her eyes burned brighter than the candle flame between them. She was even going to say something – perhaps “if you mess with Jacob, you’ll have to mess with me,” or just a simple “stay away from him,” – but instead, she dropped her eyes and went back to folding napkins with hands that refused to stay firm. She couldn’t bring herself to hold his gaze for any longer than she had to: it was too much like staring into a mirror, her own cold stare merely a pale reflection of the real thing.

The Doctor leant out and put a hand on Rosemary’s, staying their restless activity. His skin seemed just that bit too cold, a pale imitation of

normal.

‘This is an old House,’ he said, gravely. ‘Older than you can imagine. It has a long history, a knack of surviving. People have tried to do it harm more times than I can count, and yet it’s still here. Those that meant it ill . . .’

The Doctor reached out slowly, and deliberately crushed the candle-flame between his thumb and his forefinger. The darkness pounced into the room.

‘Be sure what you’re doing,’ he said from the darkness, ‘be sure what your friend is doing. Be careful.’

And then he was gone, and Rosemary found herself alone with the dark, again.

THREE

Little Sarfield: 15. March, 2000

18:32

As Tori burst through the front door, she saw Rosemary sitting at reception, staring at the dining room door. She had a look on her face that Tori couldn't quite place: probably indigestion or something.

'Alright, Rosemary?' she said, already halfway up the stairs.

'Hello, Tori,' she heard the call come, eventually. 'You gonna be joining us for dinner, love?'

'Not tonight, Rosy,' she called from the top of the stairs. 'Busy night.'

She was a good old dear, was Rosy, always trying to look out for everyone. She supposed that was why she went into this kind of business: mother all the guests. Tori didn't know what her connection was to the owner,

but she hoped she wasn't too involved. She was beginning to like her.

Not that she'd seen the owner, that dark haired little imp that she still saw in her dreams every night. Him and Tim, locked in some kind of Freudian dance. She'd just met his agents – Rosemary and Jacob, both confusingly likeable. But not enough to cloud her judgement. No. No, she knew just what she had to do: she'd spent too long picking through the remains of the owner's handiwork. The victims of his pet's voracious appetite. Wasted too much time. Well, tonight was the night when she'd find him.

Eyes on the dark sky outside, Tori reached into her bag and pulled out her revolver, caressing it with thoughts of Tim crowding around her. Tonight.

She placed the gun carefully on the four poster bed, the dark barrel reflecting the pale ghost of the crisp white duvet, and she began to prepare herself. Over to the wardrobe to pull out a thick dark jumper, and thick cotton trousers. She'd learnt a lot over the last few weeks, but not least of which was the importance of keeping warm. The first night, she'd returned cold as a icicle, fingers so numb she'd have had difficulty firing a cannon, let alone her revolver. She'd gone right out the following morning to invest in a fleece and the thin thermal gloves that she lifted from her underwear drawer.

Once she was suitably insulated, she lifted the revolver, held it to her eye. She could see dark eyes reflecting in the glossy shell, knew they were hers, imagined they were Tim's. She knew he was right behind her, was waiting for her to put him to rest, finally. The Doctor and his pet didn't stand a chance.

Slipping the revolver into her pocket, she stepped out of the room,

careful to lock the door. Bounding down the stairs again, eager to get started, she heard Rosemary call her back. Tori turned, and saw that the old woman was smiling at her, brandishing a thermos flask and a carefully wrapped packet of sandwiches.

'I made you these, love,' she said, 'keep you warm.'

'Thanks, Rosemary,' she said, slipping them both into her bag.

The old woman reached out with a strong hand, brushed Tori's arm ever so gently.

'I hope you get him tonight,' she said softly.

Tori nodded solemnly, and turned and left without another word.

It seemed strange, moving away from the house to hunt down the Doctor – the Catcher, as everyone else knew him – but after spending her first week waiting for him to make an appearance, hearing about another child missing in the night, she realised she was going to have to find him. He was out there somewhere, never coming back to the house but always getting himself a fresh victim. The village wasn't as large as it seemed, and a simple patrol route could have her covering the most likely places in a night. The places where the children slept, she meant.

As she walked down the gravel path, softly crunching in the dark evening, Tori suddenly realised she could hear someone moving nearby. Some*thing*.

She immediately hopped off the gravel, taking a few lightning paces across the lawn before rolling to the floor, hand already going for the pistol. She was quite impressed by her quick thinking, her immediate action, and

above all her hunter's cunning: if it was the Doctor's little pet in front of her, she felt sure it could have no idea what was about to hit it. Which was why she felt extremely upset when she heard a polite little cough from beside her.

'You alright?' said a loud voice above her. Tori couldn't help but be relieved that it had a half-buried London accent behind it.

Looking up, she saw a young woman, probably not much younger than herself. She was dressed in dark clothes – leggings, a short skirt, a jacket – and, despite the darkness, had a pair of mirrored sunglasses hiding her eyes. She had the kind of long flaxen hair that Tori had always admired – her own scraggly blond tresses always looked too messy once they got below shoulder length – but it was pulled back into a severe pony-tail, ready for action. It was only as Tori relaxed her grip on the pistol in her pocket that she saw the kitten sat at the woman's feet. It stretched and yawned, unimpressed.

'I thought you might've hurt yourself, the amount of noise you made,' the woman said, still grinning.

Damn. So much for her cat-like stealth.

'No, I er,' she looked around, at the smooth unbroken grass, 'tripped.'

'Right,' said the woman, and held out a hand to pull Tori to her feet. She was a lot stronger than she looked, Tori realised as she suddenly found herself jerked skywards. 'I'm Ace.'

'Tori,' said Tori, brushing the damp grass from her knees.

'You staying at the house, yeah?'

'Yeah, you too?'

'Just moved in,' Ace glanced back over her shoulder, up at the dark

building. ‘It’s a bit spooky, don’t you think.’

‘You don’t know the half of it,’ said Tori, and the young woman raised an eyebrow in question. ‘Look, I’d better get off. I’ll see you, yeah?’

‘Where’re you going?’

‘Just down to the village,’ she said, praying she’d mind her own business.

Ace smiled, a bright and charming smile.

‘I could do with a walk,’ she said. ‘Mind if we come with you?’

And by the time Tori had worked out that “we” meant Ace and her kitten, it was far too late to say no.

The Doctor had a quick glance round, and saw Rosemary heading back to the kitchen, probably to fix dinner for how ever many other guests there were, more likely just because she knew he wouldn’t be in there. Either way, it suited him. It gave him time to try and work out what was going on here.

He sat himself down on the stairs, resting his hat and umbrella beside him, rubbing his eyes. He liked the stairs, for some reason. They were always a nice place to sit, try to think. Maybe it was because he could see the House settling down around him, or perhaps it was because nothing could sneak up on him. It was frightening to think how much that had become a consideration of his life these days, rather than . . . well, the cares he’d had the first time he’d sat on those stairs seemed lifetimes away. Seven, to be precise.

He tried to clear his mind, open up a room inside him that he hadn't used for too long. Nothing. There was nothing there. It was as if he'd suddenly realised he'd lost an arm, and couldn't remember exactly when it had first gone missing.

He looked up to the ceiling, and said out loud:

'What's going on?'

There was no reply. He wasn't even sure if he was expecting one.

'Why are you doing this to me? You know why I had to do what I did.'

His voice was starting to raise. He didn't notice. He didn't care.

'Why? I did this for you. Who else did? Which of the others tried to help? Who else could help you?'

And the Doctor got his reply.

The front door flew open, bringing in a cold breeze and a scattering of leaves. Right in the centre of the cold wind, stood a tall dark haired man, his eyes ablaze. His brow sloped out over his nose, putting his eyes into heavy shadow, like his clothes, too swathed in darkness. A long flapping coat, a bright white shirt, a long dark scarf. In his arms, he carried the battered and abused body of a small boy.

'Rosemary!' he shouted, the Doctor's ears cracking with the volume. 'Rosemary!'

The stranger rushed in, barely taking any notice of the Doctor, and carried the boy over to the reception desk. With one quick swipe, the clutter from the desk was on the floor, and the body was gently lain on the surface. He began a cursory examination of the boy's mortal wounds, whilst

addressing apologies towards the Doctor.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said. ‘I didn’t realise we had guests in tonight. As you can see, there’s been another –’

The man’s voice trailed off as he cast a glance in the Doctor’s director, a grim look of apology on his face. His face went cold as stone as he saw the Doctor, stood on the stairs looking down at him. Ignoring the faces, both of them stared deep into the other’s eyes. Both forgot the world around them, seeing an all too familiar pattern deep in the other. The Doctor’s mouth opened slightly, as if to say something, something to set their worlds to rest, but he was cut off. Rosemary came bustling into the room.

‘What’s the . . .’ she stopped, eyes on the Doctor, the stranger. 'Oh, you’ve met. Doctor, this is Jacob. Jacob, this is the Doctor.’

And the two Time Lords just stood, each staring coldly at the other.

INTERLUDE

Little Sarfield: 6. September, 1999

22:24

Rosemary huddled in the kitchen, by the huge stove, and wrapped her blankets around herself. She supposed it was stupid not to take one of the bedrooms – the enormous master bedroom, for example, with its massive four poster bed – but she just couldn't bring herself to sleep in somebody else's bed. Besides, after all the years she'd spent sleeping rough, she doubted she could get comfortable in a nice soft bed any more. She'd toss and turn until she found a nice concrete floor to sleep on, yesterday's newspaper to pull over herself.

She was a woman of simple tastes – life refused to give her anything else – but that wasn't to say she didn't appreciate the heat from the stove

behind her now that the nights were cold. She'd slept by that stove every night for over a year, never once seeing anyone else in the house, not so much as a dormouse. But every night, when it came time to sleep, the stove was on and warm and stayed that way until it was time to wake in the morning. Perhaps it was used in the day, when she went down to the village to look for food, or perhaps it wasn't. She didn't want to look this gift horse too firmly in the mouth, for fear that the whole thing might just evaporate away.

She couldn't even bring herself to take true advantage of her continued good fortune. Any of the others she'd spend her nights with would have been tempted to take a little souvenir with them each morning, exchange it for a bit of cash in the village. They would have at least looked in the cupboards for food, or used the well-stocked bathroom to wash the worst of the grime from themselves. But not Rosemary. She may still eat from the dustbins of the village, still smell like a rubbish tip in summer, still be caked in a thick crust of mud, dust and dirt from the last ten years at least, but at least she hadn't slain this particular golden egg laying goose. Every morning when she left, she left the house exactly as she found it, and that was why – she was sure – that when she came back at nightfall she found the front door open to her and everything just as she'd left it.

She hoped it was an arrangement that would long continue. She liked the house – and for some reason she couldn't put her finger on, she got the feeling that the house liked her. Stupid.

If it wasn't for the nightmares, she'd be the happiest she'd been since . . . well, since the nightmares started. If she was honest, that was why she was

still awake now: she didn't have them every night, but they were frequent enough to make her approach sleep with more than a slight fear. She tended to keep herself awake as long as she could, before sleep finally claimed her. It made her more tired during the day, but at least kept the night terrors at bay for as long as possible.

That was when it happened. Or started to happen.

It came slowly, first nothing more than a slight restlessness on her part, the idea that maybe she could push sleep away for another couple of hours before it pounced. Then she started to feel a tingle all over her body, the hairs on her legs, her arms, then finally her head, all of them started to rise at the charge in the air. She felt young again, her aches and pains vanishing into nothing. She felt a grin spread itself across her face: this was the best she had felt, the greatest experience of . . .

She was so busy feeling the energy infuse her, she didn't notice the light for a few minutes. It crept slowly into the room, until suddenly it was bright as day, and she had to check to make sure no-one had turned the lights on. Nothing. Then, leaping out of her makeshift bed with new energy, she pounded round the kitchen, looking for the source of the light. She soon found it: brilliant white light was blazing in from around the door down to the cellar – the one door in the house that she routinely found locked to her. She put her hand to the handle: the door opened smoothly, with barely any effort from her.

Despite the blinding light, she found she had an overwhelming urge to walk down into the cellar. One foot in front of the other, down the cold dark steps, into the light. Except suddenly there was no light, just the faint echo of it

in the confined basement. Just enough for her to make out the tall figure huddled on the stone floor, naked as the day he was born.

He looked up at her, and Rosemary felt herself transfixed by slate grey eyes.

‘One of us has died,’ he said in a quiet, reedy voice, ‘one of us has been repl–’

He paused, unsure. He looked around the dark cellar, saw only the empty room, the small window to the outside world. The stars were bright and unfamiliar. As Rosemary watched, she could see confusion spread over his face in a wave.

‘Where are the others?’ he asked cautiously.

‘Others?’ said Rosemary, finding her voice in the gloom.

‘Something is wrong here,’ he said, more firmly. ‘Where are the other forty-five?’

‘I don’t know what you . . .’ her voice trailed off. The strange man had leapt to his feet, had taken her face in his hands, gazing deep into her eyes.

‘You’re not one of the Cousins,’ he said, a cold fact. ‘Something is very wrong.’

Rosemary gulped, unable to take her eyes from his, unable to break the touch of that soft, slightly cold skin.

‘Is there anything I can do?’ she said, willing there to be something, anything.

He looked at her again, and smiled the warmest smile she had ever

seen in her life, all other smiles merely the bastard offspring of this one, true Smile. She found herself smiling in response, her cheeks pushing against his fingers.

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘Will you stay here with me?’

‘What?’

‘Just for a while. We need the company.’

And Rosemary knew there was nothing else she would rather do in the whole wide world.

‘What about the owner?’ she said, hating her mouth for even breathing the words.

The Smile again:

‘The owner?’ he said softly. ‘I *am* the owner, I suppose. This is my inheritance.’

And somehow, Rosemary knew that things were going to be better, from now on.

FOUR

"*Given these exceptional circumstances, this council can see no other option open to us but the immediate cessation of all normal activity of the House of Lungbarrow's Loom, at least until a proper investigation can be launched. Let us hope these small actions prove to be enough . . .*"

from the minutes of a meeting of
the High Council of Time Lords,
Gallifrey, some time ago.

Little Sarfield: 15. March, 2000

19:02

It was already dark. Somewhere inside, it could feel the sun go down.

The very second the sun dipped below the valley wall, the urge was there. Some nights it resisted, knowing deep inside that it was wrong, knowing that there was something wrong with it, something it couldn't control. Sometimes the urge prevailed, and the prowl began. Just the prowl and nothing more, though. It had that much control left to it, still. Unless the dreams started. If the dreams started, then all was lost and there was nothing it could do to control itself.

Once the dreams started, the hunt began.

'If you want to get anywhere with this,' Ace said softly, 'you're going to need to learn to be quiet.'

Tori shifted awkwardly in the darkness behind her – more noise echoing into Ace's ears – and rustled in her pockets. Ace could smell the gun oil from the pistol in her pocket: she didn't mention it, because Tori hadn't mentioned it to her, yet.

'I thought I was being,' the other woman said, sulkily.

Ace turned her attention back to the street, saying nothing. The street lights burnt harsh pools of light onto the road, making the darkness beyond seem all the darker. In the houses that lined the road, more lights burned, the flat brightness of a neon bulb, the strobing flicker of a television set, the occasional flicker of a lighter. The breeze rustled the trees, caught the bushes they were hiding it. She only hoped the noise would drown out the heavy pant of Tori's breathing in her ears. Nothing else in the street moved, not so much

as a mouse. At least if there were mice, that would hold Wolsey's interest. Instead, she could feel the Kitling's boredom growing: he knew this was wrong, just as she did.

'What makes you so sure its coming here,' Ace asked, trying not to snap. She was getting cold and impatient herself.

'There are three families in this street,' Tori whispered behind her. 'Four children, none of them touched yet.'

'And?'

'I don't know. Intuition. I don't know.'

'This is wrong,' Ace said flatly. 'There's too much light here for a start. No wild animal's going to come anywhere near here. And no wild animal's going to sneak into a kid's bedroom and make off with him without anyone noticing. They just don't do it.'

'What makes *you* so sure?'

'I know animals,' she said, refusing to say any more.

Tori shifted, moving up beside Ace so that all she could smell was the woman's excitement, the anger that burned deep inside her. She didn't need to look at her to know her pupils were wide, her skin electric: she could feel it.

'And I know the Catcher. I told you, this is what they do.'

'They?'

'He goes in, gets the children – I don't know how, okay, but they go with him. Then he sets his pet on them.'

'How do you know?'

‘I’ve seen it. The creature. The cat. And I’ve met him. I know what he’s capable of. I’ve told you: they’re coming here. If not tonight, then soon.’

And Ace didn’t argue, didn’t say a word. But in her mind, a small room opened up, and Wolsey picked himself up and trotted away. She might have to waste her time staking out a no-go area, but the Kitling could at least try the more likely areas. The dark land, the waste grounds: the big church was the first place he should check – the dark graveyard and the practically ruined building would make a perfect playground for a big cat. Not a brightly lit corner of suburbia.

‘Tell me about it,’ Ace said softly, her mind half with Wolsey, half wishing it could be her racing through the dark corners of the village.

‘I don’t like to,’ she said.

‘You don’t trust me.’

‘No, I . . .’

‘I’m here, yeah? I offered to help. I need to know what I’m up against.’

She breathed in, hesitated. Ace didn’t need to look, she was louder than anything in that quiet night, even the TV blaring in the distance, or the badger nosing through the undergrowth. She could practically hear her heart beating in her chest, the fear she felt, the desire she had to be the one to pull that trigger, to end it all. But what she couldn’t hear was why. Tori breathed in again, the noise echoing in Ace’s ears. She gritted her teeth, a tearing of mountains in the silence. Then she sighed, tidal waves crashing across the shore.

‘There was this man,’ she said quietly, as if saying it too loud would

make it too real, ‘this guy, Walker. We were giving him a lift. Me and Tim. He was my boyfriend. We were going to London. So was Walker. Tim said we should: I wasn’t too sure, but he said we should, and – well, he knew more about it than me. He always knew more about it than me.’

Ace said nothing, eyes to the light, and eyes to the dark.

‘The car broke down. Bloody heap of scrap, but Tim said it was a good little motor and he kept throwing money at it, trying to bring it back from the dead. Well, it was his money. It broke down here, up there. By the house. That bloody house.’

And still Ace said nothing, despite hearing her teeth gnash, the snarl making the hairs on the back of her neck rise up.

‘We went in – Walker took us there, it was his idea. Then – things started to get, I don’t know. It’s loose in my head. I don’t remember it all.’

Shock’ll do that, Ace thought. If the Doctor’s involved, it’s always shock. But she said nothing, letting her eyes wander inside herself.

‘He was there. Walker knew him, he wanted something from him I think. But he didn’t want to give it up, so he set his pet on us. A cat, a big cat. Panther, I think, except they say panthers don’t exist. And they shouldn’t bloody exist here, not in this place.’

Looking through her sibling’s eyes, Ace saw trees slink past, heard foxes charge through the undergrowth, owls fly overhead.

‘The thing, this cat, it killed Tim,’ said Tori, softly.

And Ace saw the trees part as the Kitling edged forwards, ever aware: the scent of his prey was in his nose, the pounding of his own heart in his

ears. But something was wrong.

‘He let it kill Tim, made it kill Tim’ Tori was saying, and Ace listened, one ear with her, one with Wolsey. 'I don’t know what he did with Walker, but I think he was in on it. He bundled me off pretty quick after that, got me back to London. Somehow – I don’t know how – he convinced me not to tell anyone. I mean, how could he do that? Why would I not tell anyone? I . . . I think I went a little ga-ga after that.’

A giggle, Ace too preoccupied to respond. The trees were parting, Wolsey pushing out from behind a gravestone, the church looming at an odd angel above him. Something, something lurking in the shadows.

‘Then I found out I wasn’t the only one. I checked the papers, this Child Catcher thing. There’ve been twelve of them so far. Twelve kids, gone, dead. Must be dead. He lures them out of their rooms – it must be him – and then lets his pet have them. They found a couple of bodies you know: only a couple. Mauled. That was the word the papers used. Mauled.’

There! A shadow, flicking across one of the gravestones, the fallen angel. Go! Closer, come on.

‘And I knew what I had to do. I could let him get away with it, keep getting away with it. I knew I had to stop him. So I came here.’

In Ace’s head, Wolsey crept forward, belly to the grass, teeth bared, adrenaline racing. By the wall of the church, just out of sight of the road, bathed in shadows: something. Closer, closer.

Ace jumped up, sending Tori sprawling onto her back, shocked by the sudden explosion of movement. Her mouth was agape as Ace towered over

her, her teeth glinting in the streetlights, her eyes hidden behind her mirrors.

'Come on,' she mumbled, as if she had something in her mouth.

'But they'll come here!' Tori complained, pulling herself to her feet. 'They have to come –'

Ace snarled at her, anger flashing between them like a charge.

'They're not coming here. It's at the church. Come on, quickly.'

And then without another word she bolted off into the night, diving through the bushes behind them rather than take the well lit street. Tori was so surprised, she didn't even think to ask how she knew, she just turned and followed, blindly. In her pocket, her fingers clutched the pistol, tight.

'You're supposed to be dead.'

The Doctor let his hands run across the boy's body, the tips of his fingers brushing lightly over the dried blood on his wounds. He was young – seven or eight – his hair blond and muddy, hanging over his forehead in streaks. The Doctor had closed the boy's eyes with two fingers as soon as he had approached the desk, but he couldn't convince himself the child was merely sleeping. The wounds were too ragged for that, the face too stretched and distorted. He had died afraid, and the hands of some creature, some terror of the night.

Jacob simply stood, staring open mouthed at the Doctor, and said again:

‘You’re *supposed* to be dead. I’m your replacement.’

The Doctor fixed his Cousin with a glare, eyes burning out from shadows.

‘And you shouldn’t be here,’ he said quietly, holding the words back. ‘But something out there killed this boy, and I’m going to find out what. Then we’ll deal with *our* problems.’

Jacob shook his head, sending dark locks flying around him.

‘Of course, yes, I’m sorry.’

He hurried around the other side of the desk, standing opposite the Doctor. Both of them looked down at the child before them; one through dark grey eyes, the other through crystal blue. The broken corpse simply lay there, unable to look back.

It was only as he looked up to speak that Jacob noticed Rosemary frozen pale faced where she stood. Her hands were limp at her side, her eyes wide, pupils two dark pools, too dark pools.

‘Rosemary,’ she didn’t move. He tried again, firmer: ‘Rosemary!’

She moved then, just a slight turn of the head, her eyes still on the boy.

‘Look at me, Rosy,’ he said, suddenly afraid.

The Doctor looked up, and fixed Rosemary with an ice cold stare. He spoke softly, but firmly, his words dragging her eyes around to lock with his.

‘We’ll need to tell the local police, Rosemary,’ he said, his voice coming to her through the fog. ‘Can you tell me the sergeant’s name?’

‘Murphy,’ she said, her voice cracking. ‘Sergeant Murphy. He’ll need to

know.'

'Yes,' said the Doctor.

'I should ring him,' she said.

'Yes,' said the Doctor.

Rosemary paused for a moment, her eyes wanting to look back at the tiny body on her desk, the desk she'd been so proud of, but the Doctor's eyes called to her, held her like a moth to a flame. Instead, she shook her head slightly, as if to clear it, and then suddenly spun around. She headed into the darkness that surrounded the kitchen.

'Rosy?' said Jacob, but the Doctor put a hand on his arm.

'Let her go. She's in shock: it'll do her good to have something to do.'

'Thank you,' said Jacob, trying to catch the Doctor's eye. 'I didn't know what to do.'

The Doctor looked away, said softly:

'I get too much practice.'

The Doctor turned back to the body, placing a hand on the boy's cheek: it was stone cold. He'd been dead a while – probably a whole day, if not more. Not less than four hours, definitely. His body was still, as if the night's frost had invaded the boy's very bones, frozen them solid, immobile. The bluish tint to his skin made the red wounds all the more visible: a ragged slash across the throat, more cuts down his torso, in parallel groups of four. They made the Doctor think of train lines, a miss-mash of tracks running across the corpse.

Jacob moved to touch the body, his fingers groping for the throat. The

Doctor slapped him away with a swift hand.

‘He’s been through enough already,’ the Doctor said to Jacob’s questioning gaze. ‘Leave him for his family.’

‘Won’t you want to investigate?’

‘Why would you think that?’

‘I’ve heard a lot about you.’

‘I’ve seen all I need to see,’ was all the Doctor would say. Then: ‘You’ve had a telephone put in?’

Jacob nodded into the kitchen.

‘We had to, for the guest house.’

‘That’s something else we’ll have to talk about,’ said the Doctor, darkly.

The Doctor looked down at the body again, one last look, thought briefly of Ace. The wounds were obviously the work of some kind of cat – the throat ripped out by razor sharp canines. The claw marks down the body were impossible to disguise, but whatever had killed the boy hadn’t even tried. It had killed its prey, eaten from it, then left it for the vultures. Except there weren’t any vultures here, no Kitlings to mop up the remains of the hunt.

The Doctor thought briefly about what Murphy had said to him, the last time they’d met. This was it, then. It was beginning.

‘The Catcher,’ said Jacob, his blue eyes still on the body, ignoring the Doctor.

‘What?’

‘The Child Catcher – that’s what they call it. It’s from some film or other:

something about the way it can lure them out, then . . . then this.'

He'd been wrong – stupid mistake, thinking everyone waited for him before they started the carnage. It wasn't beginning: it had already begun.

'How many?' he asked.

'He's the thirteenth,' Jacob said.

Thirteen. Unlucky for some. Unlucky for Time Lords.

'But you don't need to worry,' Jacob was saying, the Doctor only half listening. 'I've taken steps to put a stop to it. This is my home, our home now. We won't have anything destroy it.'

'You've taken steps?'

'I've enlisted an agent,' Jacob said proudly, flashing a perfect white smile. The Doctor almost found himself warming to him. It was like coming face to face with a living mirror.

'Who?' asked the Doctor.

'It's alright. You've used him yourself, a few times.'

And the Doctor felt his hearts sink.

Chile crouched in the darkness, his dusty coat wrapped tight around him, against the cold. His boot were digging deep into the soft soil of the graveyard, his worn hand gripping one of the crumbling stones for extra support. His dark eyes, however, were somewhere else entirely. At one end of the graveyard, partially obscured by the tumbledown gravestones, was a dark

shape, wrestling with a small rabbit. The creature was dark and velvet, but unmistakably feline: the Catcher.

So this was the creature that was terrorising the families of the village, that kept them locked in their houses at night, one eye on the kiddies. It didn't look like the killer of twelve he'd been led to expect, just some overgrown kitty-cat out hunting late at night, unaware that it too was being hunted. Not that he cared either way: tired little kitten, or blood tipped fang, he wasn't doing this out of philanthropy. He had been contacted, and hired, and expected to be paid well for his services. Otherwise . . .

His meeting with the Caretaker that afternoon had been interesting for many reasons, not least of which being it was with the wrong one. Instead of the expected, it had been some lank-limbed impostor, all long hair and flashing smile. Chile could tell from the eyes he wasn't the same man, despite the frightening regularity with which he changed his appearance, sometimes even back again. He had to admit, he was quite relieved it was this child-like newcomer instead. There were old debts to be collected with the other, bad blood between them that would need to be shed before things could go on as before. *If* things could go on as before.

But this new Caretaker, he was an entirely different kettle of fish. Still wet behind the ears, blissfully unaware of how this world worked: how he had ever defeated the other and claimed his seat, Chile would never know. He was so naïve, he had called Chile to do his bidding with no idea of the costs involved: he had said that Chile could name his own price once the creature was destroyed. It was a mistake he wouldn't make twice, but Walker intended

to take full advantage of it whilst he could. Once this tired creature was banished, he could claim anything from the Caretaker's house to his very life. All for such a small effort.

The cat-thing was still gnawing on its captured dinner of rabbit, rolling onto its back and tossing the half-mauled creature into the air with its feet, maintaining the pretence of the hunt. It would tire soon, seek something else – perhaps the children he was assured it feasted on, perhaps not. It hardly mattered: shifting his weight carefully, so as not to make a sound, he began to edge towards the beast. It was large, easily Chile's size, but it would be no match for him: he could snap its neck with his bare hands, then wait for his wounds to heal before claiming his prize. Such a simple night's work.

That was when it all started to get out of hand.

The first thing he heard was a hissed "There's someone else here," cut short by a hand smothering the speaker. The cat's head whipped round, as did Chile's, and saw two dark shapes sneaking towards them. The shorter of the two made enough noise to wake the cemetery's occupants, but the taller made no sound whatsoever, her feet seemingly made of cloud and air. As soon as the shorter noise-maker saw Chile's face, her jaw dropped: the now familiar expression of the poor mortals who had found themselves caught in the Walker's workings before. He wondered briefly what he had done to her, before she suddenly screamed and launched herself at him.

Underneath a rain of tears and fists, Chile managed to roll so that he could see the cat-thing snap its head round at them, realising the hunt was on again. He could see the muscles rippling under its velvet pelt as it uncoiled

towards them, bright teeth flashing in the street-lights. He could see the blood-lust in its eyes: he'd seen it before a thousand times. He'd survive, of course, but his frenzied attacker was about to become cat food. Her own fault: she'd distracted him, she deserved everything she got.

That was when the second figure dived between them, crouched right in the creature's path. A brave way to die, achieving nothing. He heard her hiss, cat-like herself, saw the moonlight glinting from teeth that seemed somehow too large for her mouth, then saw the third intruder at her feet: a small black ball of fur, all ahiss itself, tiny teeth bared, tail ramrod straight. Faced with these two foes, two rival hunters, the creature paused, then did the impossible. It turned tail and fled, into the night.

'You killed him,' his attacker was crying to him, 'you killed him, you killed him.'

Reaching out with two iron-strong hands, he grabbed her wrists and pulled her straight into the air. He was holding her, feet kicking the air, as he pulled himself to his feet, stared straight into her eyes.

'I've been hunting that creature for the best part of today,' Chile said coldly, the woman still writhing in his grasp. 'You've cost me a day's work, and a day's pay.'

'Put her down,' said the little cat, prowling towards him.

'Have her,' he said, and threw her through the air. The young woman caught her, and set her on her feet with the minimum of effort.

'Are you alright?' the cat-woman asked, but Chile wasn't interested. If he moved fast, he could probably catch the creature again. He could still claim

his payment by the end of the night.

‘It’s him,’ the ball of tears cried. ‘He made us go there, he made us. He got Tim killed. Stay where you are!’

This last, Chile realised, was directed at him. He turned slowly, casually looking at the blond. The cat-woman was by her side, an arms length away, looking at her companions hands. They were stretched out in front of her, holding a small revolver, aimed straight at his heart. More complications, more time wasted.

‘Tori,’ said cat-woman. ‘Put it down, Tori.’

‘It’s him, don’t you get it? He’s Walker, he took us there, he got Tim killed.’

He didn’t have time for this, it was time to leave, before his prey vanished into the night. Even if it cost him a bullet in the chest, it shouldn’t slow him down any.

‘He took you to the Doctor’s House?’ the cat-woman asked, and suddenly Chile was all ears.

‘You know *him*?’ Walker asked, eyes on the cat-woman, ignoring the revolver.

‘Yeah. What about you, tall dark and gruesome?’

‘He has been avoiding me.’

‘Yeah, well he’s been busy. Righting wrongs, getting killed, that sort of thing.’

Chile couldn’t help but laugh at that: clearly she didn’t know *him* at all.

‘Creature’s such as him don’t die.’

‘Well the Doctor did.’

‘Then he’ll return. A new face, perhaps, or not even . . . what? Oh, he already has, yes? And you still think he’s mortal? What did he tell you? It was a mistake? He got better? Or science, that great god. Yes, you look like the sort for that. What did he tell you, he was an alien travelling the universe in a space ship? And you believed *that*?’

‘Shut up.’

‘Yeah,’ the gun woman joined in, pushing the revolver closer to his face. ‘Shut up.’

‘I have a boon to perform,’ Chile snarled. ‘You are keeping me from my work. Leave me to catch that creature.’

‘You’re not going anywhere!’

‘Tori, calm down. You’re not going to shoot him.’

‘If it wasn’t for him, I’d still have Tim.’

The cat-woman sighed, never taking her eyes from the gun-woman, never letting her avoid her eye. Whatever she believed, she was a professional.

‘Why don’t we take him up to the House. The Doctor’ll –’

‘He’s here?’ Chile snapped, surging forwards, finding the gun fast in his face, not even letting it distract him. ‘He’s at the House?’

The cat-woman eyed him warily.

‘Who?’

‘Him,’ Chile returned flatly.

‘Can’t you say it? The Doctor? Come on, say it.’

‘Did he tell you that was his name? His real name? Or did he tell you it was a name he’d chosen, to hide his true name? Didn’t you wonder why he needs to hide it?’

‘It’s unpronounceable.’

‘There are creatures loose in this world, demons of such immense power that to speak their names alone is to court disaster. Even their use-names are theirs, contain a hint of their true selves. How many people have died, how many got too close to that demon who calls himself healer and paid their price? He is a demon, child, and I will not tempt him by using his name in vain.’

‘That’s not true,’ the cat-woman said, but Chile could see it in her eyes.

‘If he is here, then I have business with him.’

‘What about the creature?’ the cat-woman countered. ‘What about your boon?’

‘This is an old debt, it takes precedence. The creature is yours.’

And with his coat flapping around him like wings, Chile spun and headed out of the graveyard, not running, not pacing, but at his own steady speed. Tori watched him go, blinking away her disbelief: didn’t he see the gun? Didn’t he care? She took a step forward, edging around Ace, shouting:

‘Stay there! I’ll shoot. I will.’

But still he kept walking, the dark creature that had led Tim to his

death, that had taken away her life, replaced it with pale cardboard shapes and cardboard emotions. He wasn't going to get away with it, not now. Not ever.

The gun let out a loud crack, and the walker spun to the floor.

The silence was deafening.

'Gordon Bennett,' breathed Ace.

And then the spell was broken, and Ace was rushing over to the dark heap on the ground. Tori paced over behind her, the gun heavy in her hand. She'd done it, the first step on the road to vengeance. It felt . . . well, there were two left, then it would start to feel. Ace had reached the body now, a look of shock on her face: probably never seen blood before. Not that Tori had either, but she could at least bring herself to look at it, make sure the job was done.

As she reached the body, its hand shot up and grabbed Ace by the wrist, pulling itself up to its feet, a dead man walking.

'Still don't believe in demons, child?' Chile snarled, the blood slowly cauterising around the ragged hole in his chest.

Tori felt her world reeling around her. Numbly, she brought the gun up and took aim again.

'Go ahead,' Walker snarled at her, 'fire the gun. Waste another bullet. Slow me down again. Do it. It will be the last thing you do. Ever.'

And then Walker spun, and disappeared into the darkness of the graveyard. Ace turned and looked at Tori, amazement plastered over her face, but Tori didn't notice. She had fallen to her knees and started to sob.

She wasn't sure if she would ever stop again.

Murphy turned the car into the driveway, trying to ignore the chill he felt looking up at that house. It was a demon from his childhood, the local haunted house that they'd dared each other to go in, none of them actually brave enough to do it. Closest they'd ever got was the cottage by the gateway, even that terrifying them. Well, things were different now: if only some of his old friends had stayed around to see this. Kids weren't going to be scared of the house now, no they were going to love it, the house that brought the crowds to Little Sarfield. If there were any kids left to see it, that was.

Pessimism, pessimism. It was hard not to be pessimistic when he knew what he had ahead of him. Dear Lord, let it be quick.

With careful control, Murphy eased the car to a stop just outside the front porch. Truth be told, he did it a lot more delicately than he would have, had the car not been his: the Chief Super in the city hadn't let the village have a patrol car since one got blown up in, what,'91? Come to think of it, that was up near here too. He made sure he locked the car, checking his petrol cap was firmly secure, just in case. Slipping the keys into his pocket, he crunched up the driveway to the house.

When he got there, he was surprised to find the front door waiting open for him. Perhaps they left it open for the guests, thought Murphy as he pushed through. Into a full blown slugging match.

There were two men, one short and wiry haired, dressed in tweed, and

the other tall and wrapped in a dark trench-coat. It seemed to be the little fellow who had the most to say for himself. Not that that surprised Murphy: in his experience, it was always the little fellows who came on the toughest. Probably thought they had something to prove to the giraffes. Well there'd be no-one proving anything with him here, now.

'Don't you realise what you've done?' the little fellow was saying. 'Chile is the last –'

The Sergeant coughed politely, and both men span on their heels to look at him. The look of surprise on the giraffe's face was so beautiful, it almost made the Sergeant forget why he was there in the first place. The little fellow, however, instantly recovered himself, barely a trace of surprise showing on his impish face. Like I always say, thought Murphy, it's always the little ones you have to watch.

'Sergeant Murphy,' he said, striding into the middle of the room. 'Got a call said one of you had something I ought to see.'

And without a word, the two men parted, letting Murphy look past them, to the desk. To Tommy Wiggett. Oh dear Lord, another one. He'd hoped they'd made some kind of mistake – God alone knew what kind of mistake, maybe just spotted a dead cat or something and been too afraid to go close. But now it was certain.

He took a step nearer the reception desk, trying not to look too deeply, to look at the child with a policeman's eye.

'Which one of you's the owner?' he asked, not looking at them.

'I am,' said both men together.

No prizes for guessing what they were “discussing” when I came in, thought Murphy. But he said nothing.

Again, it was the little fellow who took the lead.

‘Neither of us really own it,’ he said, edging towards the stairs. ‘We’re just caretakers.’

Murphy nodded, rested his palms on the desktop, careful not to touch the boy’s body. He was staring into his closed eyes, wondering what colour they were.

‘Which one of you found him?’

‘I did,’ said the taller man.

‘I’ll need to speak with you first,’ Murphy said, not looking up, not thinking, barely breathing. ‘The woman who made the call?’

‘I’ll go see how she’s doing,’ said the little man, and hurried away towards the back of the house.

‘Don’t go too far,’ Murphy shouted, but his heart wasn’t in it. He looked up at the tall fellow, and plastered on his professional face, the grim look of the man who’d seen in all and waded through it all unaffected. The face so different from the one he saw in the mirror every night. ‘I take it you moved the body?’

‘Yes,’ Giraffe said. Murphy waited for it, and it came right along: ‘Wasn’t I supposed to?’

Same old public. All wandering round blissfully unaware, despite all these bloody TV programmes there were trying to drum into them how the police worked. Wasn’t I supposed to? Well, you’ll probably have contaminated

God alone knows how much forensic evidence, making my job a Hell of a lot harder, but aside from that, no you just wade on in there. But his heart wasn't really in giving him a hard time: he'd felt it himself, that urge to take the poor kids into his arms, try and squeeze life back into them. How could he blame the public for doing exactly what he wished he could?

'No,' he said, 'that's fine. I'll just need you to show me where you found him. Then I'll give his mother a call, let her know we've found him. Lord help me.'

'It'll be quite a shock.'

Murphy looked the Giraffe straight in the eyes, his jaw set.

'I've known Mary Wiggett all my life,' he said firmly. 'It'll destroy her.'

The Giraffe, to his credit, just nodded and didn't say anything else stupid.

'I'd better show you where I found him,' he said, heading to the door.

'Yes,' said Murphy, 'you'd better.'

The Giraffe – he'd have to make a note to get his real name for the report – strode over to the front door, Murphy close at his heals. So close, in fact, that he nearly tripped over him when he stopped dead, one hand of the doorknob.

'Something wrong?' Murphy asked.

'No,' he answered, too quickly. 'Yes. The door's locked.'

Murphy looked at him, from under furrowed brows. It damned well wasn't locked when he came in, and he hadn't seen anyone lock it in between

times, so . . . Murphy grabbed the handle, twisted and pushed hard. The door didn't move. It was locked. The damnedest thing.

'You got a key?' he muttered to the Giraffe.

'Er, no, not really.'

'Meaning?'

'There isn't one.'

And the Giraffe turned to him, a look of dumb apology on his face.

'Only the House can lock the doors,' he said, in all seriousness. 'It looks like it doesn't want us to go outside.'

Now, thought Murphy with a sigh, this is just getting ridiculous.

At first, when the Doctor entered the kitchen, he couldn't see Rosemary anywhere. It was getting late, and the kitchen had always been gloomy at night: it was one of the things he liked about it, the half-light giving all the furniture a pale, soft-edged look. And making it impossible to spot distraught House-nappers whilst trying to avoid police officers that you hadn't really met yet. If his life got any more complicated, he'd have to start keeping crib-notes. He might even have to start keeping his diary again. Let's hope it didn't come to that.

That was when he nearly tripped over Rosemary, huddled on a pile of blankets by the stove. She was clutching her knees, staring into the gloomy kitchen, seeing things that – well, things that the Doctor couldn't, wouldn't ever

see. Her grey hair was hanging loose around her head, her mouth a thin slit, barely visible in the dark, her eyes wide and dark. Her jacket was hanging loosely from one shoulder, as if she'd got half way through taking it off when the visions hit. Now she paid it no heed, barely even acknowledging the Doctor as he crouched down beside her, placed a cool hand on her arm.

She didn't flinch, didn't move.

'What can you see?' he asked softly.

For a moment, it looked like she might not answer, like she was doomed the sit, staring like that forever, the large stove pumping its warmth into her old body forever. Then her mouth opened, slightly, and the words cracked out.

'That boy,' she whispered, 'that boy.'

The Doctor nodded understandingly, feel the warm texture of her skin in his hand, the gentle push of her pulse under his fingers. He could see the wrinkles on her skin, the fine lines marking the route to the final failure of her systems. She seemed so young. Too young to have to face up to the horror that was stalking the village, waiting to pounce. Waiting to destroy it, all but, if the future Murphy was to be believed.

'We'll stop what's doing it,' he said, hoping he sounded convincing.

'I know what's doing it,' she breathed, so softly that he could barely hear her. 'Sparrow.'

The Doctor leaned in closer, but his voice remained soft, and calm.

'You know who's doing this?'

'Sparrow,' she repeated, not looking at the Doctor. 'He took my

Sparrow. He followed me here. He won't leave me alone.'

'Who's Sparrow, Rosemary?'

Delicate words, so soft they might be crushed. Rosemary turned, fixed him with a look of disbelief.

'Sparrow. My son.'

And then the Doctor saw it, saw that particular horror that was hers alone: the Child Catcher had taken her son. He tried to think of something to say to make it better – he was the Doctor, he was meant to make things better – but nothing came, nothing came.

'He didn't care,' she went on, the Doctor merely listening, not saying a word. 'Said I was a drunk. I was a drunk. Said I didn't deserve to have a son, said he didn't love me like that. And then one night he took him, just snuck into his room while I was asleep – while I was drunk asleep on the floor – and took him.'

And the Doctor said:

'Did they find a body?'

And Rosemary fixed him with that look, really saw him for the first time. She looked so confused, so lost, the Doctor wished there was something he could do to make it better. But it was past, it had happened: all he could do was watch it. All he could do was stop it, now.

'Why would there be a body?'

The Doctor was taken aback, floundering in sudden depths he hadn't seen.

‘The other victims –’ he tried.

‘Why would he hurt him? He was his son. He only took him cause he was afraid. Afraid of what I’d do to him. Of my temper.’

The Doctor was lost now, searching desperately for the path back.

‘The Child Catcher was his father?’

‘*Frank* was his father. Frank wouldn’t do something like that. Couldn’t. He . . . he died.’

‘I don’t understand.’

And then the light came back into her eyes. Blinking, she washed the visions out of her sight, saw the Doctor again. She smiled weakly, wiping moisture from her eyes, wiping it on her blouse.

‘I’m sorry, it . . . it was just that boy. He reminded me of my son,’ she said, embarrassed. ‘He . . . his father took him away one night. He’s been on my mind recently. The children here – the way they just vanish from their beds. The way . . . I’m sorry.’

The Doctor nodded solemnly, his eyes bathed in shadow. His hand, still rested lightly on Rosemary’s hand, so gentle neither of them noticed it was there, perhaps.

‘I understand.’

‘Do you have children?’ she asked.

And somehow, the Doctor felt he owed her the truth. He couldn’t chase away her demons, but he could at least give her that.

‘I had a daughter,’ he said quietly, his face dark, his eyes invisible.

Rosemary nodded, silent. Her hand found his, found it cool and hard.

‘You know what it’s like then.’

The Doctor nodded, yes, he knew what it was like. He knew what it was like. He . . .

‘She died,’ he said, feeling that old shift inside, that *kick* whenever he talked about her. Maybe it was the House, trying to kick the guilt back into him.

‘I’m sorry.’

‘So am I,’ he said.

‘What about her mother?’ Rosemary asked, but the Doctor said nothing.

He gently pulled his hand from under hers, stood up. He was shorter than her, Rosemary knew, but in that instant he towered over her, wrapped in darkness, so indistinct she could barely see him. He looked down at her, through the night, and spoke softly:

‘We should get you to bed. You need to rest.’

‘I am in bed,’ she said, resting her back against the stove. ‘I like to feel the warm.’

‘You sleep with the stove on?’

‘I think Jacob lights it. It’s always on when I get here. He knows I like it, and we need the rooms for the guests.’

‘Try and get some sleep,’ he said, trying not to think about the guests, trying not to wonder where Rosemary, where Jacob, where both of them

were, last time he was here.

Rosemary shook her head, a slight grin on her face. The Doctor looked questioningly at her, not a word said.

‘I don’t sleep too well any more. All this business with the Catcher,’ she looked embarrassed again. ‘I get dreams. Nightmares. Children disappearing. Sparrow going.’

And that was when it hit, like a lightning bolt through his spine, up into his brain. How could he be so blind? How could he not realise? Now he had seen it, it was obvious, a giant monolith on the horizon, blocking his every move: so large he had completely missed it before now. But not any more. He leaned in close to Rosemary, gently pressed a single digit to her forehead.

‘No dreams tonight,’ he whispered in his soft Scot’s burr, ‘I promise.’

And as she drifted quietly into a quiet, contented sleep, the Whirlwind spun out of the kitchen, just winding up to speed.

FIVE

Little Sarfield: 15. March, 2000

20:17

Chile had moved fast, showing a lack of concern for anything but his goal that only he could display. It had led him in a direct straight line between the churchyard and the House, climbing the steep wall of the valley in the pitch darkness. It held no fear for him: should he lose his footing and stumble, he had only to rise again and continue onwards. Death, he knew, had no hold over him, even if he had no real understanding of why. Not even a creature as powerful as the Caretaker could tell why Chile was spared mortality, but it didn't matter. Chile knew how the universe turned, and he knew he would be there, watching from the sidelines, when it finally spun into the pits of Hell. Even if he shoulder did hurt like buggery, burning where the bullet had pierced

the skin, itching as the flesh knit itself back together.

Stupid children. Stupid naïve children. Not a blind clue how the universe worked, just wandered in armed with their “science”. Science wouldn’t help them, once the Heart was in his hands.

And it was so close. The House was towering over him now, just the thin road, the heavy woods, standing between him and it. *He* was inside, and with him, the Heart. The Emerald Heart of Kotchi the Deathless: the most powerful of all the arcane artefacts, sister-stone to the small blue Lung Egg, lost forever. The very stone that Kotchi used to keep himself alive for centuries, the lodestone he had used to divide himself thousand fold and best any army that stood against him. The great payment he had been offered by that most powerful of demons, in return for the simplest of boons.

It had seemed to good to be true, and then – a year ago, more – it had turned out it was. Despite the boon being completed, despite all the extra efforts he went to, making sure everything was perfect, the Caretaker had refused payment, sending some minor demon in a pretence of stealing it. Such a pathetic trick, but Chile had been wary of going up against the demon unprepared. But not now. Now he would have his payment, or they would see which was the most powerful: the Walker or the Caretaker.

Chile pushed on, entering the woods that bordered the House, the spindly trees seeming to park at he came through. The Caretaker’s gardens knew who the stronger was: would the demon himself be prepared to accede? Chile doubted it – he could be stubborn, even devious when he way was questioned, and he knew more tricks than the serpent: the demon had been

around longer than *this* Earth, learning all the time. But then Chile had thought that about Cromwell, so far back in the past that it was hazy in his mind, and things had turned out well enough there.

Then the trees parted again, and Chile could see it ahead of him: the squared off darkness of the foreign House he knew so well. On to claim his dues.

He strode up the gravel path, not hiding his entrance, not trying to stalk. If he was in the grounds, the House knew he was there. And if the House knew, the Caretaker would know too. There was no point in hiding. Instead he held his head high, looking at the pale brickwork, the dark windows, the dark shadow of the watch-tower rising from the slated roof, wondering what battles it had been built to warn of. Perhaps it had been built in anticipation of the battle that would happen here tonight, he thought. For some reason, he felt a chill run down his back.

Just before he reached the door, he noticed something strange. Although the front of the House was quiet and dark – as it was always, whether or not anyone was in residence – there was a bright light spilling out from somewhere to one side of the House. It seemed to be emanating from the cellar: there was, Chile knew, a small barred window that led down into the basement around that side. However, this light was no lantern or bulb: it burned a bright and furious green.

For some reason, Chile found himself thinking of the crystal green of the Heart.

No harm in checking, before the battle, he thought to himself.

Turning from the door, he paced around to the side of the building, towards the light. He never made it back to the front door.

‘Tori,’ whispered Ace urgently, then again: 'Tori.’

Nothing. The blond woman wrapped in the expensive clothing simply knelt on the cold muddy ground, gravestones watching her silently as the tears rolled down her face. Ace had seen plenty of tears in her life – they seemed to follow the Doctor round like children – but she couldn’t remember ever seeing these before. Her face crumpled and distorted as the water feel, but she never made a sound. Not so much as a whimper, a mime of broken grief.

Ace looked around her, head whipping this way and that, wishing she had the time to let Tori bring herself out of it, knowing that she hadn’t. The young woman could be like this for the rest of her life, which didn’t look like being very long.

‘Tori, we’ve got to move,’ she hissed.

Tori said nothing, just wept.

Ace looked around herself again, down from the gate to the graveyard, up to the low wall at the back, picking out all the tumbled gravestones in between. Despite the darkness, despite her sunglasses, she could make out everything as clear as day. She could see the blank eyes of the fallen statue, half-masked by the overgrown grass. She could make out a fox, crouched still in the bushes, well aware there were bigger predators them him around, hoping to get out alive. As were all of them. But whatever Ace could see, she

couldn't see the tell-tale sheen of the Catcher's sleek fur winding its way towards them.

She reached up with a steady hand and pulled her sunglasses from her face, folding them without looking and dropping them into her jacket pocket. Her eyes glowed brilliant yellow as she tried to pierce the cover.

'It's still out there, Tori,' she said, only half there. 'It won't give up the hunt that easily.'

As she stared, Ace open the corner of her mind that was Wolsey, using the Kitling's eyes as well as her own. Despite the perfect clarity of her own vision, using Wolsey's eyes made Ace feel like she was missing out on half the world: his eyes were so sharp they could pick out the colours of words, and see the weather shift on the other side of tomorrow. But even the Kitling, pushing silently through the undergrowth, couldn't find a trace of the creature.

Perhaps, Ace started to think. She got no further.

'What's going on here?' came an angry shout from behind her.

Spinning round, Ace caught sight of a balding little figure in a dressing gown striding up the path towards them. She recognised Father Andy immediately, and cursed to herself quietly. Now she had two of them to keep alive, as well as herself. Briefly, she found herself wondering what the Doctor was up to, why he was here to have to deal with all this. Then she set off, leaving Wolsey with his eyes on Tori, trying to intercept Andy.

'I've called the police,' he was shouting. 'He'll be here any second. You _'

'Father, it's me.'

He stopped – just what she didn't want him to do – and looked at her with a look of confusion on his face.

'Me who?' he asked.

'Me,' said Ace, and by now she was stood beside him, tugging at his elbow.

'Miss McShane,' he said, allowing himself to get pulled along by her. 'What's going on?'

Ace opened her mouth to answer.

Tori looked up, fresh tears on her face.

Wolsey screeched a warning, exploding out of the bushes.

With a roar like a lion, like an enraged Tyrannosaurus, muscles rippling in the pale light, claws and teeth razor slashes of white in its dark pelt, the creature burst from behind the crumbling church. Tori screamed, Andy nearly fainted, Ace called out to Wolsey, who was already trying to position himself between Tori and the creature. This is all starting to go hideously wrong, Ace realised. Perhaps she wasn't cut out for this kind of life after all: staying in one time for twelve months had made her soft, dulled her edge.

There was a deafening thunderclap, and the creature hurled backwards through the air.

Ace looked on, amazed, and then saw Tori, still crouching down, face still wet with tears, but with her still smoking revolver held out in front of her. She looked for all the world like she was trying to use it to ward the creature away, Van Helsing with a crucifix. The creature lay on the ground where it had fallen, writhing on its back, not getting up. As Ace ran to Tori and Wolsey,

Father Andy stood slack jawed, eyes wide in the dark.

'What is that?' he breathed, but Ace still heard him.

'That's your Child Catcher,' she said, reaching Tori's side, putting a firm hand on her arms, pushing the gun to the floor. 'Nice shooting, Tex.'

With a sudden twist, the Catcher was back on its feet. It opened its jaws wide and howled at them, freezing their hearts in their chests. Despite her enhanced vision, Ace couldn't see any trace of a wound in the smooth black pelt.

Ace pulled Tori to her feet: she came up without a word of complaint, the gun limp in her hand. *Follow*, she told Wolsey, then turned and pulled the dead weight towards Father Andy. He stood there, his eyes afire, watching them chase towards him.

'Quickly,' Ace yelled. 'Into the church.'

And then the Catcher stopped howling, and raced after them.

They were stood by the door, Jacob wondering what to do, Murphy just about to tell him to stop messing about, when the Whirlwind spun into the room.

'I've been an idiot,' it said, coming to a brief rest in the centre of the room, its two-tone shoes seeming to rest just above the intricately woven rug on the floor. The house seemed to darken around him, storm clouds seemingly gathering around him. It was as if everything around was waiting to see what he would do next, not just the two men, but the walls, the lights, the

carpets, the very fibre of the universe itself were waiting, expectant.

Even Murphy himself felt uneasy, not even sure why. But he tried to struggle on, ever professional.

‘Have you got a key to this door?’ he said.

The Whirlwind doffed its hat, and when it returned to its head, there was a large iron key sat in the palm of its hand. With a quick snap of the wrist, the key was sailing through the air, turning from end to end. Murphy caught it and quickly tried it in the door. Not that the Whirlwind noticed: it was already picking up speed, hurrying from one corner of the room to the other.

‘I didn’t know there was a key,’ said Jacob, petulantly.

‘Only the Caretaker knows there’s a key,’ the Whirlwind called back sharply.

‘This key doesn’t work,’ Murphy snapped, starting to feel his patience giving. ‘If you’re trying to be clever . . .’

‘I’ve not been clever,’ said the Whirlwind. ‘I’ve put this off too long, and now . . . This is all my fault.’

‘What is?’ Murphy asked, the key still held in his hand, useless.

‘This,’ he snapped, fixing Murphy with a stare so cold he felt his very soul freeze. There was fire in the Whirlwind’s eyes, but it burned like ice. ‘Death, destruction, loss, your Child Catcher. All because I’ve been too stupid to look to my own backyard.’

Despite his unease, Murphy felt himself automatically reaching for his notebook and pen. If this strange little man knew something about the Catcher, something that might solve this case some time soon . . .

‘Are you saying you know something about the missing children, sir?’

And the Whirlwind pointed an accusing finger, straight to the Giraffe.

‘Ask him,’ it said, coldly.

Jacob spluttered and shook his head as Murphy turned to him, pencil at the ready, eyebrow raised. He looked like he wanted to beg for mercy from his accuser, but already the Whirlwind was spinning around the world, tapping first one panel on the walls, then another. Nothing seemed to satisfy, and the Whirlwind kept spinning.

‘I don’t know what you mean. I don’t know anything –’

‘You don’t know anything about it,’ said the Whirlwind sharply, spinning round onto Jacob. ‘But why not? I thought you were the Caretaker here – at least that’s what you seemed to think, and I couldn’t see any good reason to doubt you – but then it struck me.’

‘What?’ stammered Jacob.

‘Where’s your ring?’

This was fast getting away from Murphy: first they seemed to think they could solve his whole case for him, now they were bickering about jewellery. Perhaps the old stories about the house were true – perhaps it had been a mental asylum, and these two were just some long lived patients. Even as he watched, Jacob was shaking his head, not understanding (and who could blame him, thought Murphy) while the little Whirlwind pushed a ring made of some kind of Celtic knot into his face.

‘When a Caretaker and a House accept each other, there is a ceremony, bonding the two of them for the rest of their lives. The Caretaker

takes a ring as a symbol of that bond,' the Whirlwind was spitting. 'Only you don't wear a ring. Rosemary does.'

Jacob looked like his world was fast falling apart all around him. Murphy wanted to run up to him, give him a shoulder to lean on, at least arrest this little man for pestering the weak but likeable. Something made him stay still, however, and keep his mouth shut.

'I don't understand,' Jacob said, and the Doctor softened.

'I know,' he said. 'I know.'

Murphy found the courage to speak then, but couldn't bring himself any closer to the pair of them. He stood by the door, the useless key in his hand and asked:

'What's all this got to do with the Catcher?'

The Whirlwind turned his attention to Murphy. Somehow, he wished he'd kept silent.

'I know this is hard, Sergeant,' he said, putting a hand on his: the key sat, cold and solid between them. 'This House has chosen Rosemary, had done long before Jacob arrived. It formed a link with her, as it had with me, a long time ago. It's my own fault: I neglected her. It's no wonder she looked for someone else.'

That was it then, thought Murphy. The whole world was turning mad, and there was no escape from them.

'I came back here, quite some time ago, while I was ill. It was a foolish thing to do, but I wasn't thinking straight. By coming here, all I managed to do was pass on my illness to the House.'

Perhaps if the door didn't work, he could break a window, get to the car somehow, escape somehow.

'And the Rosemary came here, bringing her own nightmares with her. And the House picked up on those too, letting them bleed into its own illness,' the Whirlwind's eyes were dark, his lips tight. He was barely looking at Murphy anymore. 'The creature out there – your Catcher – is the result. A creature that steals children away without a trace in the dead of night, then hunts them down like animals. The Child Catcher is part of this House, Sergeant.'

The Whirlwind was in front of him, Jacob to one side looking amazed by all he heard. It didn't look like the amazement of a man who realises he's surrounded by lunatics – the amazement no doubt showing on Murphy's face. No, Jacob was totally sold on this madness. Murphy couldn't see any way out, and he couldn't bring himself to pander to this lunacy, no matter what.

'Doctor,' he said, 'this is a house. It can't go round the village hunting and killing. It's here. Full stop.'

And the Whirlwind got that look in its eye – the look that Murphy would see in dreams for the rest of his life – and pulled Murphy's hand towards him. It opened out, revealing the big iron key in his hands. The big, solid, cold iron key.

'This House is a strange creature, Sergeant,' the Whirlwind whispered gravely. 'It's woven from the very fabric of the universe itself. Like this key, in your hand. And like that key, all it takes is the tiniest effort to change it into anything it wants to be.'

And as Murphy looked down at the cold iron in his hand, it melted and

shifted, no longer a cold solid key but something else. As he looked down onto his palm, he saw a tiny velvet creature staring back up at him. He could see the muscles flexing under its skin, feel the heat of its breath against the heel of his hand, its weight on his palm, the sharp points of its razor claws pushing into his skin. He could see hatred burning in its bright yellow eyes, and heard its tiny growl as its pushed its weight onto its back legs and launched itself into his face.

He let out a gasp, but too late. The creature was a key again, clattering to the floor. As it landed, it turned into a bright silver liquid that was quickly soaked up by the old wooden floorboards, leaving not a trace behind.

‘That’s magic,’ he breathed.

‘No,’ said the Whirlwind. ‘Mathematics.’

Murphy looked down at his hand, and saw four tiny wounds, where the creature’s claws had broken the skin. Now it was him who was going insane.

Jacob suddenly piped up, as the Whirlwind started spinning around the room again, pressing and pulling at panels apparently at random.

‘And that’s why the House has locked us in here? So we can’t go and stop the creature?’

The Whirlwind shook his head.

‘The House has locked us in here, in this room, because it knows that I’m going to stop it, and it doesn’t want to be stopped.’

‘Then how are we going to do it?’ Jacob asked.

‘Before the House came here, it was a lot bigger. I needed to change that, camouflage it so no-one would recognise her. But she still needed the

same number of rooms. So I hid them, in the cellar. That's where the House is at her most basic, her most primal. Her most vulnerable.'

'But we can't get to the cellar,' said Murphy, cursing himself for getting dragged into this madness, rubbing the tiny points of blood on his hand away. 'We're locked in.'

And the Whirlwind stopped, and looked at him, a manic grin splitting his face.

'There's more than one way to skin a House,' he said, tapping at the wooden panel nearest his head. It opened up, revealing a long, dark passage, barely tall enough to crawl down. 'Who's first?'

Murphy felt his heart sink. There went his quiet night by the fire.

SIX

Little Sarfield: 15. March, 2000

21:48

The Doctor led the way down the corridor holding aloft his umbrella, the tip of which was burning quite merrily to itself without ever growing faint. Murphy followed close behind, with Jacob bringing up the rear, a look of confused disbelief on his face. If what the Doctor said was true, then the long haired man was having to rapidly reappraise his position in the scheme of things. Murphy didn't envy him the task: he wasn't sure if he understood it all, let alone where everyone fitted into it. All he knew was that the little man with the grey eyes said he could stop the killings, and he was willing to give him that chance. That and the fact that he was trying as hard as he could to forget that tiny key-creature, launching itself at his face.

‘Be careful,’ the Doctor said over his shoulder. ‘If the House really doesn’t want us to stop it, it might try all sorts of tricks.’

Murphy didn’t even want to consider what that might mean. He’d seen more than enough tricks for one day.

The most impressive trick had been that stunt with the panel. He’d been the first in, the Doctor saying it was impossible to get lost in there. He found himself crawling in a dank, stone corridor that by rights should have been only a foot long, coming out into the dining room. Instead, he had crawled for five minutes, going neither up nor down, until he had suddenly fallen out onto the floor of the cellar. The Doctor had gracefully jumped down after him, saying there was no time for playing around, and rushing straight over to the far wall. At least Jacob had helped him up when he’s dropped down from the ceiling.

When Murphy had looked up, there was no hole for either of them to have come through, just solid wooden roof.

‘This way,’ said the Doctor, taking them down another turn into another dark, wood panelled corridor. Jacob was looking around him, obviously seeing these places for the first time, but the Doctor surged ahead confidently, as if he had known each twist and turn every day of his life.

The Sergeant knew that navigating these corridors was no mean feat. When they had first left the cellar, Murphy had been having trouble getting his head around the architecture of the place. The Doctor had told him that the House stretched out for miles below the basement, but he could see how. He had grown up in the village, lived there all his life, and he knew that there was

no room in the hillsides for all this. The mines alone took up most of the valley wall – empty and derelict since the eighties, but still there nonetheless. The Doctor had simply told him to not think about it too carefully: it would only make his head hurt.

The corridors themselves were the strangest mishmash of styles that Murphy had ever seen: the first corridors they had come to from the cellar – through a door that wasn't there when he turned around to go back through it – had been hewn from living rock, flaming torches attached at regular intervals along the wall. It was into one of these that the Doctor had dipped his umbrella, telling them not to worry, it was only the mathematical representation of a fire. He assumed that the smell of plastic burning that filled the air was just the mathematical representation of the stench, too. And the mathematical representation of the burning at the back of his throat was damned realistic too.

'Be careful,' said the Doctor, pushing open another rich wood panelled door. The corridor beyond was made from neat red bricks, with a lush blue carpet on the floor. Fiercely burning gas-lamps were fixed to the walls at regular intervals, casting strange shadows.

'Just how dangerous is it here, Doctor?' Murphy asked.

The Doctor got a look on his face that Murphy didn't like: it seemed to suggest that he hadn't really considered it too much before.

'I'm hoping that she won't really want to hurt a member of the Family,' he said, almost sounding sure. 'After all, she was raised to look after us.'

'I'm not a member of your family, Doctor,' said Murphy.

‘No,’ said the Doctor. ‘Come on, keep up.’

Great, thought Murphy, and tried to position himself so that he had the Doctor in front of him, and Jacob behind. Just in case.

Jacob was being strangely quiet, in Murphy’s opinion. He supposed it was understandable: it wasn’t every day you found out your new business venture was secretly going out and killing people at the weekends. But still, he expected him to have something to say for himself. Instead, he just trudged along behind them both, his eyes flicking half-hearted up at the new surroundings. Perhaps it was shock. That could do that to a person. Better to keep an eye on him, just in case.

Perhaps noticing Murphy’s attentions, Jacob chose that moment to pipe up.

‘What about Rosemary?’ he asked. ‘Will she be alright?’

‘She’ll be fine,’ the Doctor assured. ‘She’ll sleep for the rest of the night. I made sure of it.’

At least that’s one less thing to worry about, thought Murphy as he hurried to keep up with the Doctor. Not that there wasn’t plenty to keep them busy in the worry department as it was.

Upstairs, in the kitchen, Rosemary’s eyes flicked open. She felt tired – unusual for her at that time of night – but more than that, she had the nagging feeling someone was calling her name. She looked around the kitchen, but saw nothing. Perhaps it was just a dream? Then she saw the light flooding out

of the cellar door. Somehow, she knew she had to go down there.

The door opened, practically of its own accord, and she walked carefully down, into the light.

‘Quickly,’ shouted Ace, ‘get anything.’

Father Andy nodded urgently, his dressing gown flapping around his legs to reveal neat paisley pyjamas: he had been just getting ready for bed when he’d heard Tori’s gunshots and decided to investigate. He was proving quite useful though, dragging everything from the lighter pews to the font against the doors to try and keep the creature out. Tori was proving less useful: her two fruitless attempts at shooting things, she seemed to have given up on everything and was just kneeling where Ace had left her, staring at her gun with an unreadable look on her face. Ace would worry about her later. She was busy now.

Using all her strength, Ace was upending the heavier pews and resting them up against the dusty stained glass windows. She hoped that would be enough to keep the creature out if it decided to make a concerted effort. As it was, it was pacing around the church doors, occasionally patted at them with a heavy paw, checking their strength. Ace could see it comfortably, even as she worked, through Wolsey’s eyes. The Kitling had refuse to retreat to the church with them, instead remaining outside to keep watch on their attacker. Ace had tried to convince him otherwise, but he had been adamant. Ace could still remember when she’d been like that – desperate to assert her own

authority – so she hadn't argued too strongly.

'Do you think they'll be strong enough?' Father Andy asked, echoing Ace's own fears.

'They'll have to be,' she said. 'It's not trying to get in yet. Perhaps it'll get bored.'

'Perhaps,' echoed the Father, looking down at Tori.

Ace followed his gaze. She was still sitting there, rocking backwards and forwards, staring at the gun in her hands. Ace could just make out what she was whispering to herself again and again:

'He killed Tim. I shot him. I did.'

Ace felt sorry for her, in a way. Revenge never turned out to be as simple as it looked. And that was another problem for her to worry about, she realised: Tori was still adamant that the Doctor was to blame for her fiancé's death. Worry about it later, Ace, you've got enough on your plate as it is.

'Will she be alright?' Father Andy asked, moving closer.

'I don't know,' Ace said firmly. 'Let's worry about keeping that thing out there. Then we can worry about her.'

'Of course. I'm sorry. I'm not used to this sort of thing.'

'Happens every day where I come from, Father,' Ace said, and for some reason Father Andy thought she was joking. 'I think we've got everything covered, though.'

'Oh no,' said Andy, his face going pale.

'What?' asked Ace, feeling her heart falling.

The Father looked at her, his face limp.

‘I left the vicarage door open,’ he said.

‘Gordon Bennett! Which door.’

Father Andy pointed with an limp arm towards a door at the other side of the vestry and Ace was already running before he dropped it again. If she was fast, she could probably barricade it before the creature even got wind of it. If she was lucky.

Wolsey was itching at the back of her head for attention. It would have to wait.

‘You finish the windows,’ Ace yelled over her shoulder, pulling the heavy door shut and looking for something to wedge it with.

‘Okay,’ said Andy. His next words were lost under the horrendous scream of two giant wooden doors being torn from their hinges.

Ace spun around, a lectern still in her hands, and watched as the two ten foot high doors splintered in on themselves, pushing all the accumulated barricade that they had managed to pile up away in one swift movement. Wolsey arrived in a flash of light at Ace’s feet, all ready to protect his Sister, all angry that she had ignored his warning. She was fairly angry at herself, for that matter. She was on completely the wrong side of the room to help either Andy or Tori against the darkness battering through their fortifications as if they were paper.

‘Oh God,’ whispered Andy, a desperate prayer for help.

Then the doors gave way, and the darkness pounced into the room.

The Doctor turned a corner, and stopped dead. Murphy and Jacob nearly walked straight into his back, Murphy nearly singeing his hair on the man's burning umbrella. He was getting too old for this kind of messing around: he was meant to be retiring, for Christ's sake.

'What is it?' Jacob asked, looking over the Doctor's shoulder and seeing nothing but a blank wall.

The Doctor spun around and slammed his umbrella so fast against the floor that the flames instantly went out. He was glaring around at the walls with a look that was pure murder etched onto his face. Whatever was wrong, it hadn't made him any happier.

'What is it?' the Doctor echoed. 'She's cheating, that's what it is. That's not fair!'

Murphy felt it was time he tried to reassert his authority over matters: after all, he was meant to be the policeman in the situation. No matter how weird things were, it was his job to deal with them. He stepped up, and put a firm but reassuring hand on the Doctor's shoulder. The little man simply stood and stared up at him, fire burning in his eyes.

'What exactly seems to be the trouble, sir?' he asked in his best professional drawl.

'She's changing the architectural configuration,' the Doctor answered through gritted teeth. So much for that approach then. 'She could have shifted us anywhere. It'll take us days to find where we want to be at this rate.'

'And where do we want to be?' Murphy asked.

‘Wherever she doesn’t want us!’ the Doctor hissed at the ceiling.

Murphy was just getting into the right mood to pack it all in. Not just the job – everything. The whole reality thing. If houses could start moving themselves around the countryside, preying on innocent children, why not just give in to all the rest of it, too? Or just tell the Chief Super exactly who his chief suspect in the case was and see how long it took them to find him a nice rubber room to bounce around.

‘She knows where I want to be. But she’s afraid of letting me get there. But she can’t keep me out forever!’

‘She’s not afraid, Doctor. She’s terrified.’

Both men turned to look at Jacob in surprise. It was the first thing he’d said for the last five minutes, practically the only sentence he’d managed to string together since they’d entered the cellar. Now he was looking at the Doctor with an intensity that Murphy could barely recognised. The Doctor looked equally confused – perhaps he wasn’t as used to seeing it as Murphy was, but the Sergeant could tell at a glance: it wasn’t just the house that was afraid of the Doctor. Jacob was growing more and more petrified by the second.

‘She’s always been terrified of you, Doctor. Didn’t you know that? Didn’t you wonder why she stopped talking to you, unless she really had to? You scare her. She knows what you are, what you do, and now she’s terrified you mean to do it to her.’

The Doctor was taken aback, genuinely amazed, Murphy could see. He stopped his ranting to the ceiling and leaned against his umbrella, his mouth

falling open. He tried a couple of words before he finally managed to get a sentence out.

‘I . . . I’ve changed,’ he managed to say, and that was all for a few moments. Then: ‘I just want to help her, Jacob. She can’t go on like this.’

Jacob stared at him for a moment, eye to eye, with such an intensity that Murphy felt like an intruder in a deeply private moment. Then Jacob nodded and the moment was broken. Without even looking, Jacob pushed against the wall behind him with a single hand, and a door hewn out of the deep red brick opened as smooth as silk. Looking through, Murphy could see only blank white walls, tinged with a pale green light.

‘In you go, then,’ he said, and motioned for the Doctor to go first.

Murphy followed after the two caretakers, finding himself walking out into a pale white room decorated at irregular intervals with dark roundels indented into the walls. The only source of light seemed to be a pale green glow coming from one side, yet the whole room seemed to glow with white. None of that was what Murphy noticed first. First he noticed the Doctor, drawn to his full height glaring to the far wall. Then he noticed the green gemstone embedded in the wall. Then he noticed the coffee-skinned man crouched down by it, one hand pushed tight against the jade facets of the gem.

‘Walker,’ the Doctor breathed.

The rat-faced man looked up at the Doctor, and Murphy retched. His eyes had no pupils in them, just blank empty whites.

‘No, Doctor,’ he said, his voice strangely booming yet feminine, ‘I am Lungbarrow.’

And the Doctor merely nodded.

Rosemary found herself wandering through corridors she had never seen before, rough stone walls with fiery torches burning on them that she had never even guessed were below the cellar. It didn't surprise her, though, as she stepped through this impossible world: she had a picture in her head of the thousand thousand labyrinthine turns that coiled in on themselves, each hiding within the other, a multitude of rooms too large to ever fit inside the House's tiny shell. In her mind's eyes, one room glowed a pale burning green, refracting into infinity.

But even as she walked without thinking towards that room, she was paying it no attention. Her mind was full instead of another picture: a large green gemstone, roughly the size of an ostrich egg. It glittered in her mind, irresistible. And a quiet voice that she had grown to love whispered to her how important that jade egg was, how much she had to keep it, protect. Protect it with everything she had, every last thing. And she knew the voice was right, and that she should do everything it said. Why else was she there?

And without looking, Rosemary kept walking through the corridors, winding ever closer.

Ace watched as the creature bounded through the wrecked doors and stood in the bright light, its head turning this way and that. It was the first time

she had seen it clearly, the first time she could see the true power buried within its hulking muscles, the smooth sheen of its velvet skin, the burning yellow of its eyes. It looked like some great black cheetah, she realised, and instantly thought of Wolsey. The Kitling was at her feet, fur on end, waiting for her first command. But it was already to late.

With a single bound, the creature launched itself towards Tori, who simply sat on the cold stone floor and watched it come. The gun rested in her hand and never came up, as if she knew it was futile, that nothing could stop the creature now. As if she knew she was about to go the same way as her beloved fiancé, and meet him in the next world. She was a good hundred yards away, the creature less than five metres from her. It was hopeless.

The creature growled, and Tori shut her eyes. Ace was already running, Wolsey hard at her heels, but she knew there was no way she could stop what was about to happen.

‘No!’ screamed Father Andy, his rotund figure already moving, fast. ‘Not in my Lord’s house.’

He screamed at the top of his voice, swinging a mitre at the started creature, cracking it a good one across its shoulder blades before it could even react. Now if he had the good sense to run, thought Ace, they might all get out of this alive. But Father Andrew didn’t look like he was going to run anywhere. He planted his feet firmly on the ground, and swung the mitre again. It cracked across the creature’s nose, breaking it cleanly. Blood spurted out, and the Father let out a cry of triumph. It soon cut off as the blood instantly stopped pouring, and the nose healed itself in a second.

Why is everybody invulnerable today, thought Ace, still yards from the creature.

The creature paused, fixed Father Andy with a yellow-eyed stare.

‘I . . .’ said the Father.

With a single slash of its velvet paws, claws slicing clean through the air, slipping passed the molecules themselves, Father Andrew was cut down. Four thin trails of blood burst out onto his vestments, deep crimson welling up from far too deep inside him. He looked down at his chest in surprise, still a full second away from the pain of it. Then the creature swiped again, and broke his neck clean through.

As he landed awkwardly against the wall, Ace was already screaming. And still Tori did not move.

The creature turned lazily, cast a burning eye across the room. It saw Tori, helpless on the floor, and saw Ace sliding to a halt, panting to herself, her face a mask of rage. Her eyes matched the eyes of the tiny hissing creature at her feet, all tooth and claw. Her teeth were at once too big for her mouth, razor canines bursting out. Her whole body shook as the adrenaline poured through her veins. She fixed the creature with her fiercest look, and spat:

‘If you don’t kill me first, I’ll rip you in half before you get a step towards her.’

And the creature seemed to nod, just for a second, before Ace launched herself hissing into its velvet embrace.

The Doctor dropped his umbrella, took his hat from his head, and advanced on the coffee-skinned man with both hands outstretched. Jacob stood, guarding the door, whilst Murphy tried to work out where he would be best to stand. He knew he was in over his head here – if he wasn't careful, he'd drown. The best he could do was keep away from the action, and do what he was told. Which was nothing. No-one had spoken to him since the secret passage had opened up in front of them.

'You're not well,' the Doctor told the man – Lungbarrow? 'I want to help.'

'I am not well,' the man echoed, his voice lilting disturbingly. 'You want to help.'

The Doctor kept his hands visible while taking a quick glance at the glowing jewel embedded in the wall. The man was still clutching it with his right hand, so tightly that the knuckles were turning bone white. The green light was glowing through his hand, making the skin seem a sickly septic colour. He didn't seem to notice.

'So that's what it is,' the Doctor said, knowingly.

'What?' Jacob asked, genuinely intrigued. So this Lungbarrow fellow wasn't telling him everything, then. Interesting.

The Doctor didn't take his eyes from the man blank white eyes, but pointed to the glowing stone with a quick gesture.

'The Emerald Heart of Kotchi the Deathless,' he said gravely. 'Very useful for sustaining part of your body matter entirely separate from the rest of

you. That's what's keeping the Catcher separate from you, isn't it.'

'That's what's keeping the Catcher separate from me,' the man echoed again. What was he, simple?

'That's good,' the Doctor said, sounding as if he meant it. 'You're keeping the Cheetah Virus in the Catcher, aren't you. That's why you needed to create it, to keep the virus from infecting the rest of you. So all you need to do is let me take the emerald, and you'll be free of the virus.'

The Doctor reached for the gemstone, keeping his eyes on the dark clothed man, but Lungbarrow was too quick for him. His grip on the stone tightened, his free hand pushing the Doctor away again. The little man went sprawling straight onto his back on the floor – the coffee-skinned fellow must be stronger than he looked, another thing to bear in mind before diving in. The Doctor was looking up at the big fellow, a look of disbelief on his face.

'No,' boomed the big man, his hand still clutching at the jewel.

'I don't understand,' the Doctor snapped. 'Don't you want to be cured.'

'No,' he repeated.

'Then what?' asked the Doctor.

'She doesn't want to be cured, Doctor,' said Jacob softly, from behind them, 'because then you'll go away again, problem solved.'

'I don't . . .' began the Doctor, and was interrupted.

'I remember,' said the giant. 'I remember the Family. I remember being happy. I remember having Cousins to love, to nurture, to protect. I remember . . . I remember them loving, nurturing, protecting me. I . . . Where did it go? Why did you take them from me? Why did you take me from them?'

And for the first time since Murphy had met him, the Doctor was silent, unsure what to say. Tears were rolling down the dark man's face, his features distorted with emotion. It made Murphy want to reach out, tell him it would be okay. Christ alone knew what it was doing to the Doctor.

'She's lonely, Doctor. That's why she wanted me to open her up to the guests,' Jacob intoned quietly. Everybody was listening, careful not to miss a word. 'But that's not enough. She just wants to go home. We both do.'

'I want my mountain,' sobbed the man. 'My deep sweet roots.'

'Neither of us belong here. Neither do you, Doctor.'

The Doctor was on his knees now, looking up at the dark figure clutching the jewel.

'You did all this, just to get me here,' he said. Neither of them answered him. 'What are you planning?'

And Jacob reached into his pocket, pulled out a small glass globe. Murphy strained to see, but from what he could make out it looked like a small snow-scene, the kind you could buy from any tourists shop. As Jacob swung it through the air, snow began to fly in the water inside the globe. It fell gently on a perfect replica of the guest house. Jacob tossed the snow-scene through the air, and the Doctor caught it without looking.

He stared at it, sitting in his hands, said nothing.

'Take me home,' said the dark man.

And that was when Murphy worked up the courage to speak.

'What's going on, Doctor?' he said.

‘This House doesn’t belong here,’ he said quietly. ‘This globe will link it to my TARDIS – my transport – and I can move it anywhere I want. Just like I did the last time.’

Sometimes, thought Murphy, it just wasn’t worth the effort.

‘Take me home.’

‘Take us home.’

Ace rolled, forcing the weight of the creature under her, and bit hard. She felt the skin give, the strange blood spurt into her mouth, and had to admit – just to herself – that it felt good. Then she felt the wound heal instantly, and spat the blood out in disgust. There was nothing she could do: even if she kept in close to the creature, even if she fought to stop it ripping her and Tori to shreds, there wasn’t a thing she could do to hurt it. Eventually, she would tire, and that would be that.

Wolsey wasn’t having much luck either, hissing and spitting on the creature’s face, his claws extending to keep him firmly attached. The creature was tossing and turning its head to try and dislodge the Kitling, but to no avail. Even the rolls it kept throwing itself into, trying to shake off Ace, only made her cling on tighter. There was nothing else she could do, save let go and die.

Briefly, she hoped the Doctor was having better luck. Then she bit again with her sharpened canines, and dug in tight as the creature rolled again.

‘Take us home,’ Jacob repeated.

It look like again he would get no answer, the Doctor still staring into the snow-scene. Then he drew himself up to his full height, turned on Jacob and said a single word. It echoed in the confined space, Murphy hearing it more than once he could swear:

‘No.’

The tall man in the dark clothes let fresh tears fall from his face, slumped to the floor with a wail, his hand still clutching the glowing jewel. Murphy watched Jacob’s face set hard, his shoulders seeming to broaden as he towered over the Doctor.

‘Then I’ll have to make you,’ he said, taking a step forward.

For no reason he could understand, Murphy threw himself in between the Doctor and Jacob, sizing up to the long haired man, his eyes barely level with his chest. The taller man looked down at him, almost pitifully, and reached out with a slab-like hand. Murphy knew there was nothing he could do, but he had to at least try to do his duty. It was what they paid him for.

‘No,’ screamed the Doctor, and Jacob froze. ‘No more.’

The little man pushed himself in between Jacob and Murphy, and despite being shorter than Murphy, somehow he managed to hold his own against his cousin. His grey eyes were burning with a darkness that sent a chill down Murphy’s spine. He briefly considered holding back the Doctor, afraid of the damage he could do, but something stopped him. Somehow, he got the feeling this little man was a much better judge of what was right and

wrong than he could ever be.

‘She hasn’t told you everything, has she, Jacob,’ the Doctor growled darkly.

‘No, don’t listen,’ the man said from the floor.

‘What do you mean?’ Jacob asked, unsure.

‘Has she told you where the other Cousins are? Has she told you why I brought her here in the first place? Why I leave her here, even though I know what it does to her, even though I know she was grown to be full? Why don’t you ask her?’

‘Don’t listen. Take me home.’

‘Ask her.’

Jacob took a tentative step towards the dark mass of tears on the floor.

‘What does he mean?’

But the coffee-skinned man was in no condition to answer. He was a heap on the floor – his hand still clutching the gem, but the rest of him destroyed. Tears flowed from his eyes, and the only sound he made was a deep, heart-breaking sob.

‘I want my Family back,’ he finally managed to cry.

And then the Doctor stepped forward, and put an arm around the man, comforting, soothing, understanding.

‘I know, I know.’

‘What happened?’ breathed Jacob, eyes to the broken creature on the floor.

The Doctor sighed, his eyes hiding themselves in shadows, looking back. Further than he cared to, for the sake of his soul.

‘There is a secret that only the House knows in our Family, for her own protection,’ intoned the Doctor, the air chilling around his ever word. ‘But someone found it out. There . . .’

He paused. No-one spoke.

‘The High Council decreed that the Loom should be shut down, pending an investigation – some other matter, but perhaps that’s how they found out: investigating the Loom.’

A sigh, a shiver, the images in his head, his alone.

‘The Cousins started to vanish, one by one. There was no Loom to make replacements, no-one could be entirely sure they had died. They just vanished. Soon there were only a few of us left, then only the two of us. That was when the House told me the secret, and I knew what I had to do.’

Silence, silence, even the man silenced. He started to draw himself up, the tears drying on his cheeks.

‘Gallifrey wasn’t safe any more. I . . . I made arrangements to leave, take the House with me, hide her somewhere, somewhere no-one would ever look. And then I had to abandon her, so that even if they found me, they wouldn’t find her.’

‘Alone,’ the man said, standing tall now. ‘Alone.’

‘I didn’t know,’ said Jacob, almost to himself.

‘This can’t go on any more,’ said the Doctor. ‘You know you can’t go home. You know what that stone is doing to you. Let it end now.’

And the tall, dark-skinned man looked down at the Doctor, towering over him, looking for all the world like he might pounding him to the floor. Then, slowly, he nodded, and turned away. Reaching out with his other hand, the tall man grasped the glowing gem firmly in both hands. With a gentle pull, he pulled it clean away from the wall.

The creature suddenly jerked beneath her, kicking out with its back legs so that Ace found herself flying through the air. She landed hard, pulling herself to her feet again, and saw the beast shaking its head by the ruined doors, by Father Andy's body, by Tori, still sitting blank faced on the floor. Wolsey was still clutching at its back, his claws ripping the soft velvet pelt to shreds. But as Ace watched, she suddenly realised that the skin wasn't knitting back together. The creature wasn't invulnerable any more.

With a cry, she dived back into the fight.

Rosemary stood by the door, heard the voices but didn't understand what they meant. Then the voice in her head went silent too, that quiet, insistent voice telling her about the beauty of the gemstone. But she suddenly realised that that didn't matter any more: glancing through the door, she could see the pale green fire of the gem itself. It was more beautiful that anything she had ever seen before, even her little Sparrow who she would have died for. She didn't need the voice to tell her about its greatness anymore: she

could see it for herself.

Then she saw the tall dark man reach out with both hands and pluck the stone from the House's grasp. She felt a memory shift in her head, a memory that wasn't hers, that came from the soft wooden ring she wore on her finger. The same tall dark man, come to steal the gemstone from them, demanding it, having to be tricked out of it. Now he had come to steal it back again.

Rosemary knew – absolutely knew – that she couldn't let that happen. Screaming like a harpy, she burst into the room and launched herself at the stone, legs flying as she sailed through the air. She reached with her fingers and snatched the stone from the thief's grasp, as Jacob, the Doctor, that policeman, all looked on in dumb silence. She felt triumph flood through her as the floor sailed up to meet her, her arms still outstretched.

'No!' screamed the Doctor, trying to intercept, but it was too late.

The jewel hit the floor first, cracking right down its middle like an over-ripe egg. All the green fire held within, every inch of power that had ever coursed through its fragile body, all was released in one fiery burst. The flames surrounded Rosemary, infused her body with more life than she had ever felt, making her feel young again, just for a few brief moments. Then her body started to rebel, fight against it, vibrate with disharmonics until she could feel it in her teeth.

Whilst the Doctor, Jacob, Murphy stood by and watched, Rosemary laughed as the jewel cracked, and her body crumbled away to dust.

With a final massive push, Ace managed to fling the creature across the room, into the remaining pews which went down like a pile of dominoes. She was on her feet again in a second, Wolsey panting by her side, but she already knew there was no need. She had heard the crack as the beast landed badly against the wooden seats. She knew what it meant. She'd heard spines snapping before. She could see it bent awkwardly, trying to pull itself up one more time, for one last attack. To no avail.

Then, with a final shriek that shattered every window in the church, sending shards of glass flying in every direction, the creature exploded into a shower of green sparks.

When the firework display was over, and the glass had settled, Ace crunched her way across the stone floor towards Tori. The young woman was still crouched there, not saying a word, rocking slightly. Two bloody tears were slowly rolling down her cheeks, from where the glass had landed near her eyes. Another inch or two and she would have been blinded. Ace hoped that she'd recover herself enough to realise how lucky she was.

Sitting down next to the woman, Ace wrapped her arms around her, tried to force away the urge to continue the hunt that was welling up inside her, and waited for the cavalry to arrive.

EPILOGUE

Little Sarfield: 18. March, 2000

13:15

The Doctor stood with his back against the church, feeling the roughness of the brick despite his thick coat, feeling the cold bite in his bones. He was holding his umbrella up to his lips, as if it could somehow breathe the life back into him, his eyes tired, and dark. He watched in silence as two men from the village struggled with a pulley system, tied to one of the fallen stones in the graveyard. Slowly, as if reluctant to release its grip on her, the green grass finally parted around the statue, and the stone angel lifted into flight once more.

The Doctor looked at her, hanging there, impassive, and his thoughts were his own alone.

He was still trying to work out whether things had turned out right or not. The House was settling back down again, Jacob skulking through its rooms, a constant look of unease on his face. The Catcher's reign had ended – thanks to Ace – and now the village could sleep in peace. But most of them wouldn't: two families had moved in the last couple of days, and they were just the first. Sarfield was awash with cardboard boxes and mover's vans, the very life drained out of the place. It would be a hard three years, and what had they got to look forward to then?

The Doctor cast a dark glance up at the manor house, glaring down at him from opposite the House. He tried not to think about it, to resist the urge to pre-empt himself.

There were too many lose threads left dangling now, too much unresolved for him to feel good about himself. Murphy was trying to comfort Mrs Wiggett, help with the arrangements for her son's funeral. He had promised to stay for that, before he made his move again. Ace had taken the opportunity to visit Tori in the hospital: she was getting better, they said, but she might never come back to what she was before. Before she got dragged into the Whirlwind's path, watched her life torn from around her for reasons she couldn't even comprehend. Another casualty with his fingerprints all over them.

Ace herself was shaken, too, he could tell. She had pushed further into the virus' control than she had been before, had had to just to protect herself from the creature. The creature he'd brought to the village. She had calmed herself, eventually, sliding into that grey half-life somewhere between human

and hunter, but it still worried her. Not the transformation, he guessed, but how pleasing it had been to join the hunt, for just a few moments. He had been there himself, he had tasted the blood on the wind. He knew how strong the call was.

Hard times ahead, hard times behind. And then . . ?

As he watched, the stone angel hovered in the air, her stone wings seeming to flap over her podium, almost disturbing the grass with their wind. The two men struggled as they tied her secure, leaving her broken feet just inches away from the stone of her base. Once she was secure, they set about fixing her back to her platform – for the first time in a hundred years – using a thick paste of concrete and rubble. Her cold stone eyes seemed to stare down at him, unblinking, unmoved. Just for a moment, he saw another pair of eyes, dark and round, full of love, and had to turn away.

‘I wondered where you’d got to,’ said Jacob.

The Doctor didn’t move, still kissing his umbrella, still frowning. He wasn’t surprised: he’d known exactly where Jacob was, exactly how long he’d been there. After all, he was Family.

‘I had to make sure they treated her gently.’

Jacob nodded softly, looking across the churchyard at the grave.

‘Who was she?’

‘She was Susan, my granddaughter,’ the Doctor looked up at Jacob, his face unreadable. ‘She was the first child to be born on Gallifrey in . . . in longer than anyone can really say.’

‘I don’t understand.’

The Doctor sighed, his eyes on the grave in front of him, his mind on the graves behind him. But he couldn't remain silent. Jacob was Family – he deserved to know what he was.

'Back before the House left Gallifrey,' he began, then paused. 'Before that. Back before I was woven, there was a Cousin of Lungbarrow. Cousin Mulciber, one of the greatest geneticists our downtrodden Loom had ever produced. He could have done anything, had he set his mind to it, anything at all. But he was obsessed by one thing: our sterility.'

Jacob was silent. The angel's grey eyes watched over them both, her children, her charge. All was silence.

'He started work, using the Loom to splice Gallifreyan genes with those of a relatively unheard of species, from some backwater of the time-lines. Every time a Cousin died, his replacement was woven less and less pureblood, one step closer to Mulciber's dream: a fertile Time Lord.'

'It would have taken centuries,' interjected Jacob.

The Doctor nodded.

'Patience was never something our kind lacked. Except for me.'

'What happened?'

'Things progressed well. The first hybrid Cousin was woven, and though he was still sterile he showed promise. His genes were re-spliced, re-cut, and fed back into the Loom. When, three centuries later, another replacement was woven, she was so close – genetically speaking – to the first that she couldn't be called his Cousin. She was his daughter, Ash. And she was fertile.'

Overhead, storm clouds were rolling. Neither of them noticed, all eyes on the workmen, the angel, the grave.

‘Mulciber got really excited about that, eager to move on to the next stage of his work. He used a subject from that tiny backwater planet, and he used Ash, and eventually she fell pregnant.’

The angel stood and watched, her hands spread in forgiveness, but her face cold and blank.

‘There was no way he could hide a pregnant woman on a sterile planet, so he kept her confined in the House. He thought he could trust his Cousins not to betray him. He was wrong. One of the Cousins worked for the CIA. He thought it was his duty to report him, and Mulciber was taken into custody, Ash with him.’

The Doctor turned and looked at Jacob, a single tear in his cold grey eyes.

‘There hadn’t been a child born on Gallifrey in millennia. They had no idea what to do. There . . . there were complications. The child was saved, but the mother . . .’

The clouds broke overhead, and a soft gentle rain began to fall. Neither of the Time Lords noticed, both looking at each other. The rain struck the statue’s cold face, sending a single tear trickling down her stone cheek.

‘The High Council ordered that the Loom be shut down, while they tried to decide what to do. Centuries of indecision, probably, but it was taken out of their hands. The Cousins started vanishing. Never replaced, never found. The Cousin who had betrayed Mulciber, he realised what was happening, saw it

too late. All he could do was use his position, his limited power, to free Ash's child – to free Susan, his granddaughter – and take her where they could never find her. Out into the universe.'

And then Jacob saw it.

'You?'

'I thought I was doing what was best. I was wrong.'

'But you're not a pure Gallifreyan?'

'None of us are, Jacob. The Loom was never reprogrammed, just closed down.'

A pause. The words hit Jacob, leaving him winded. The two men stood in silence, watching as the angel was secured, standing over them, wings outstretched, as if showing them the way to escape. Fly above it all, she told them, fly away.

'Is that the big secret?'

The Doctor shook his head solemnly, said nothing. The implication was clear: don't ask, and you'll be happier.

'How did Susan die?' Jacob asked eventually.

'She hasn't, not yet,' said the Doctor, and then when he saw Jacob's confused look, he added: 'We made an agreement, when we were travelling together. When we died – however we died – we would come back to the House to be buried, back to when the House first came here. That way, whenever we arrived on Earth, we could always visit each other, to pay our respects. If you look closely enough, you'll see my name on that headstone, too.'

Jacob felt a chill.

‘How?’

‘I’ve made arrangements with an old acquaintance. He’ll outlive us both, and he’s been paid well.’

‘Chile.’

The Doctor nodded.

‘Part of our original deal. I brought the House to Earth, and he found somewhere to hide it, and took care of our arrangements when the time came.’

‘Only he was somewhat over-zealous when it came to keeping it secret,’ Jacob said, realising suddenly. ‘All those villagers.’

‘I didn’t know he’d done it until it was too late,’ was all the Doctor could say.

‘And you trust him with the House?’

The Doctor looked up at the House, through the rain.

‘The House chose him. I think it saw an echo of its own loneliness in him: he’s lived longer than his kind can, and it’s made him wary of other humans. I think the whole experience has changed him,’ he sighed then, turning on Jacob. ‘I think things will turn out for the best with him. No, all that we really have to worry about is you.’

And Jacob felt a chill again, having those slate grey eyes resting on him. He looked to the floor, and prayed to whatever gods he knew that he was doing the right thing.

‘I can’t stay in the House. I know she needs someone, but I . . .’ he looked sheepish. ‘I can’t stay there.’

The Doctor nodded solemnly, his lips to his umbrella again. Then he smiled broadly, and the clouds lifted.

‘Don’t worry,’ he said. ‘I think I’ve got the perfect idea.’

And, alone again in the graveyard, the angel watched the little man lead the taller away, into the village. If her stone face could have smiled, be sure it would have.

CYCLE

‘*There exist in the world certain soft places where the fabric of Time and Space haven’t yet been bent to the will of the indigenous people, where history and geography haven’t yet been shaped by the dominant perceptions of mankind. As the explorer pushes further and further into the unknown, so – consequentially – does the number of soft places decline. But some still remain, in the grey areas of the maps, where there be beasties, ready to ensnare the unwary traveller. Ready to gain their revenge.*”

The Geography of Places That Never Were,

Mark Attwood.

Some Where

Some Time

In some ways, it was a cold and misty morning in the middle of winter, somewhere up in the Pennines. In some ways an observer could look down from the small range of hills – they weren't really large enough to be called mountains, in his opinion – and see Manchester in the twentieth century waking up to a cold new day. But Loki wasn't fool enough to believe what his eyes told him. He could just as easily look down and see medieval Manchester waking to a bright new day of Saxon raids and bitter poverty. Not that it was called Manchester, not then, but then it didn't really matter. Not to Loki, at least.

All that really mattered was that he was where he was, the grey mists swirling all around him, at exactly the moment at which he was supposed to be there.

Soon it would be all over.

Somewhere, a raven laughed overhead. As it had, before. As it should, now. It existed in that confused mass of tenses that he laughingly referred to as his memory. It didn't matter: soon it would all be over. Soon tomorrow would follow today, and the days events would be as new and fresh to him as . . . as . . . It had been too long since anything was new and fresh for him: he lacked the words to describe it. It would be a beautiful ecstasy, not knowing. It would be a fearful terror.

At his feet, the fire crackled, as he knew it would. He stared deep into

its heart, knowing already what shapes he would see there.

‘So,’ said a voice, as he knew it would, ‘this is the end, then.’

Loki looked up. Not because he needed to see the dark man before him, see the shaved head, the hook nose, the raven’s gait. Not for any of that, but because he knew he had, so long ago. Now.

‘No,’ Loki said, ‘not yet.’

The dark eyed man said nothing, for a moment, staring into the patterns in the fire. Loki briefly wondered what he saw in the red light, whether it surprised him. It didn’t matter.

Quietly, Loki mouthed the words “And what will we do next” to himself, his eyes still in the fire.

‘And what will we do next?’ asked the hawk-nosed man.

Loki shook his head softly, grey locks whipping softly around his head. There was no reason why his hair should be grey – his appearance was his to choose, after all – but it suited his sense of self that after so many years, it should somehow show in his face. Besides, it would save confusion, later.

He lifted his eyes from the fire, fixed his companion with a glare.

‘Go now, Munin. They’re coming.’

‘How do you know?’ asked the dark eyed man, but never received an answer.

Seconds later, a large black raven cut across the sky, disappearing quickly into the mist. Loki was alone, again.

Then, floating softly out of the mist, the voices came.

‘So where are we?’ came the first: young, inexperienced, unknowing. How Loki envied him.

‘Earth,’ replied the second, a soft Scot’s burr blurring the edges of the words. ‘Manchester. Late fifteen hundreds. Out of harms way.’

‘And this is your perfect idea?’ said Young indignantly.

‘You’ll survive,’ retorted Scot’s. ‘A few hundred years growing up, and then we’ll see what we can’t do with you. And you’ll still be able to visit the House, if you need to.’

And then they appeared, coming slowly out of the mist as if materialising, as if each individual atom was fighting against the soft place, asserting its right to live, to be real. Loki watched them from his fire: it wouldn’t be long before they saw him, he knew. He looked at them, whilst neither had seen him, seeing the way the mud clung to the younger man’s dark coat, the way the shorter of the two paced the ground with the tip of his umbrella. The way the mist clung to the both of them, as if unwilling to give them up.

A strange moment, a double vision: Loki saw the strangers through his eyes, and he saw himself through theirs: a powerful man in a uniform, red hair shaved right to the scalp, blue eyes piercing and cold.

‘Who’s that?’ said Young.

The shorter man in the tweed jacket froze, his grey eyes fixing Loki with a steel gaze.

‘Ah,’ he said, as if his worst fears had been confirmed. 'Jötunson.’

‘Doctor,’ said Loki, evenly. ‘Jacob.’

‘Should I know him?’ Young – Jacob – asked the Doctor, nervously.

The Doctor's eyes never left Loki, as if afraid he would suddenly uncoil from the fire, work some new evil spell on him.

'I seriously hope not,' said the Time Lord grimly. 'This is the . . . person who killed me.'

'Killed you?' echoed Jacob.

'Of course,' said Loki, his voice measured, his heart pounding. He remembered each word clearly. 'Why else did you think your Loom decided to weave you?'

'Because . . .' said Jacob, and stopped.

'Because one of the forty-five was dead,' finished Loki, softly.

And the Doctor stepped between them then, and so could not see the look in Jacob's eyes, somewhere between fear and awe, gratitude. He held aloft his question mark umbrella like some sort of sword, as if it could stop Loki now, of all times.

'What do you want, Jötunson?'

Loki shook his head, sadly.

'Not Jötunson, not now. Not for a long time,' he said sadly.

With barely a movement, the illusion of the barrel-chested soldier dropped away, as if it had been nothing more than a cloth held up to disguise the truth. Suddenly, Loki was revealed as he preferred to be: old, long haired, powerful, yes, but powerfully tired. He held his arms out, as if to show that he had no weapons concealed within them.

'Now I am Loki,' he said weakly, 'as I always was.'

And there it was, that flicker in the Doctor's eyes that he had never been able to read, no matter how hard he tried. And he had tried, for countless millennia. Perhaps it was recognition: perhaps the Doctor knew, perhaps had always known. He didn't know. He didn't suppose it mattered, now.

'It was a long time ago when we had our little games, Doctor.'

'Not for me,' said the Doctor, his face unreadable.

'Even so,' snarled Loki, 'you should show me some gratitude.'

'Gratitude!' snorted the Doctor. 'For what, exactly?'

Loki drew himself to his feet, feeling his burden evaporate with each word that left his lips. Not so many left now, not so many at all.

'For what I have done, and for what I am about to tell you,' he spat, forcing an anger he did not feel to bubble into his every word. 'You are in the soft places, Doctor: you should beware. Where you are going may not be where you arrive. Be careful.'

'Beware the Ides of March,' mocked the Doctor, waving his arms in the air, 'beware the ideas of Mars. Beware my terrible wrath!'

'I am not threatening you, Doctor,' Loki said, just a little petulantly. 'Merely trying to give you advice.'

And Loki caught Jacob's eyes, made sure he had his full attention as he intoned:

'As I shall always be here to give you advice.'

'I think I'm big enough to look after myself, Jötunson, thank you. Come

on, Jacob.'

And the Doctor shepherded the silent youth away into the mists, the grey veil soon coming in to obscure all but their vague shape, a grey outline in the light of the fire.

'You could at least be a little grateful,' said Loki softly.' I didn't have to bring you back to life.'

But already the two figures were gone, swallowed up by the grey.

Loki settled down to wait. It wouldn't be long now.

The fire burned, crackling to itself.

In some ways, it was a cold and misty afternoon in the middle of winter. In some ways, only a few hours had passed since the Doctor and Jacob had spurned his help. But Loki wasn't fool enough to believe that: he knew that in other, less vague, places time was passing with its usual velocity, its mad rush to reach its own oblivion. Just because the mist still clung tight, just because his fire still burned bright, it didn't mean that the world outside was unchanged. Oh no.

'How much longer do you plan this to go on?' asked Munin, impatiently kicking some brushwood into the fire. It caught almost instantly, shrivelling into nothing within seconds.

'As long as it takes,' Loki answered, even though he was entirely sure how long it would take: it would take until it was over, finally. Until it had begun.

Munin stiffened, his hawk-nose twitching this way and that as he scanned the grey horizon.

‘Someone’s coming,’ he said nervously, seeming to tense for flight.

Loki merely nodded, saying nothing.

Out of the grey, stumbled a worn and dishevelled figure, a blade sticking out from between his ribs, blood pouring from the wound. His hair was matted and greasy, his skin caked with dirt, but the eyes that fell on the fire were alive and bright. Had he not known, Loki would have been hard pushed to recognise Jacob, so much had he changed in the few hours since the Doctor had herded him away. But of course, Loki did know. There was no way he couldn’t.

‘You,’ muttered Jacob, before his eyes fell on the other dark figure by the fire.

Loki was already moving, leaning Jacob down by the fire before he could fall, or run. His mouth was already working as fast as his hands, reassuring the injured Time Lord.

‘This is Munin: he is nothing to be afraid of.’

‘Unless you piss me off.’

‘Who is he?’

Loki’s hands fell to either side of the blade embedded in Jacob’s ribs.

‘In one sense,’ he said cautiously, ‘he is the herald of Odin One-eye, the Gallows God. He flies faster than memory, when the need takes him, leaving his master insensible and weak. In another, he is the projection of one of Woden’s many future incarnations. Try not to worry about it.’

‘What happened?’ asked Munin, although whether he asked Jacob, or Loki, neither could be sure.

‘They came from nowhere,’ was all Jacob could say.

With one swift movement, Loki pulled the sword from Jacob’s chest, it’s rough edge slicing cruelly through his secondary cardiac muscle. The blood flowed, deep purple seeping into the dark soil. Jacob groaned.

‘Oh God,’ he breathed.

And for just a second, Loki was tempted to leave him. The wound wasn’t particularly deep, but it would be enough, if left untreated. There might be another way, a new, unforeseen path. But even as the thoughts fell into his head, his hands moved to take Jacob’s shoulders: he had known the thoughts would come, as surely as he knew his own name. It wouldn’t change what had to be done.

‘Listen to me Jacob of Lungbarrow,’ he said, his voice soft and hypnotic. ‘You are dying. Your blood is spilt on this dark earth, and your regeneration will fail. You are not strong enough to take the change.’

‘Oh God,’ Jacob moaned again.

‘But there is another way. Look inside yourself, deep into your heart: see the individual fibres of your being. See them, and take them in your hands. See how easily they move and bend to your will. How easily you can knit them together, however you will.’

Munin snorted then, and Loki saw panic fire in Jacob’s eyes. But then they closed, and he could feel the man’s mind moving inward. Visions of cells and blood vessels filled his head, his breathing shallow as he felt the

excitement – yes, the excitement – of taking his life in his hands and changing it. Munin was suddenly silent as he saw Jacob's wound glow and burn, then suddenly buckle and warp completely out of existence. The young Time Lord seemed as astounded as any to see his chest smooth and unbroken, completely healed.

'What . . ?' stammered Jacob.

'You have been told before that your Loom holds deep secrets,' Loki said softly, helping Jacob into a sitting position. 'In you, they go deeper than most.'

'Who are you?' Jacob asked suspiciously.

'Later,' said Loki, light burning in his eyes. 'First you should tell us what happened to you.'

And, despite his misgivings, Jacob did.

They had come out of nowhere, one minute nothing but trees and air, the next two burly villagers, swords in hand. It was his own fault, he realised as they struck him to the ground: he could blame no-one but himself for the kicks that thudded into his side, splintering ribs. He had become careless, he knew, had stayed too long in one place, had ignored the Doctor's advice.

'These are dangerous times,' he had said grimly. 'You should be safe as long as you keep moving. Don't let them see how slowly you age. Don't let them see how quickly you heal.'

Good advice. It had served him well for nearly sixty years: settle in one

place, one small corner of history for fifteen, maybe twenty years, and then go: if you must come back, leave it a few years and pretend you're your own son. It had worked before, kept him safe. It would have kept him safe for centuries more, he knew, until the Doctor came back to take him who knew where. But then he had met Mary.

He didn't know what her real name was. He had met her in the Americas on one of his infrequent trips there, trying to let the good folk of England forget who he was. He was Mr Jacob Renfield now, dealer in foreign goods, merchant, trader, and she was merely a slave, her true name taken from her and Anglicised for her new masters. A slave with the deepest, most soulful, chestnut eyes he had ever seen in his life.

It had been a relatively simple matter to free her, marry her and transport her home to England with him, costing Jacob only the merest hint of injury, the very minimum of blood shed.

And the day she had borne him a son was the very day he should have jumped back onto his boats and sailed away, never to see either of them again.

They called the boy Jacob Thete Renfield – after his father and the man who had brought his parents together respectively – although to his mother he was always Chile, simply their Chile. He brought Jacob more joy than he thought it ever possible for a Time Lord to feel, even a Time Lord who was partially human. He grew fast, and he grew strong, and – thanks to his mixed heritage – he stayed healthy: any wound the boy received healed within seconds. Jacob sometimes found himself wondering if a big enough injury

would cause him to regenerate, and then found himself praying that he never found out.

He found a strange comfort in watching his boy and his wife grow older with him, waking each day just to see what new thing this world would show him. If he found cause to look in the mirror, then he wasn't too perturbed to see that he did not age as his wife and child did. It was only to be expected: he was not like them, after all. In short, he grew careless and stupid. It was only a matter of time before trouble found him.

The rumours started without him even hearing about them: how strange it was that he never showed age despite, what? Twenty years in the village? How strange that no matter what afflicted his son, he was still to be seen the very next day playing with the other boys. Could it be there was something . . . unnatural about that family? Could it be the Devil himself had blessed him, in return for a steady trade in pure souls, no doubt stolen from the villagers children while they slept innocent in their beds? Could it be there was witchcraft involved? Could it be that Jacob Renfield must die, for the very safety of every man, woman and child alive in the village? It surely could.

And so they had come for him, the bravest, the drunkest swordsmen in the village. It perhaps said something for his reputation as a plaything of the Dark Prince that only two of them dared come at all. They were all the army they had needed, falling on him unexpected as he had walked home from the Harbour Master's house that evening. Their boots were heavy, crushing bone like shells on the beach, the woods resounding with a splintering crack that made him think of trees being felled. Their sword was not sharp, but it was

sharp enough for the task at hand: it sliced clean through his clothing, piercing his heart clean through.

They had left him there to die, little thinking that he might have a second heart to keep him alive, if only for a few more moments. He had thought that the mist before his eyes was because of the blood that was slowly seeping out of him. It had been a long time since he had thought about the grey haired stranger up on the hills, a raging fire to keep him warm, a thousand faces to hide him from prying eyes. Instead, he thought of the Doctor, thought of his wife, and thought of his son.

Who would look after them now, now that he was dead?

For a time, Loki said nothing, merely staring into the fire, his thoughts his own. Munin was pacing, bored already by even this most short of interruptions. Poor creature – even now, he didn't see the truth. No matter: he would soon. Jacob Renfield, nee Lungbarrow, had eyes only for Loki, seeing nothing else, not the fire, not the impatient projection, not the mist, the ever encroaching mists. He didn't even seem to notice the bitter chill in the air. No matter. It wasn't important.

'You said you'd be here to give me advice,' Jacob said presently.

Loki nodded, saying nothing.

'Can you help me?'

'I can do more for you than that,' said Loki, not meeting his eyes. 'I have done more for you than that.'

‘Meaning?’

Munin snapped, kicking a large log into the fire, sending sparks dancing into the air. They soon chilled and died, falling again to the sodden earth. No matter.

‘Meaning,’ snarled the raven bitterly, ‘that we’ve spent a good part of the last hundred years making sure that you were born.’

‘I wasn’t born.’

‘Woven, whatever. It’s down to him.’

‘Why?’

Loki shook his head, his meaning clear: it didn’t matter. He pulled himself to his feet, motioning for Jacob to do likewise. For a moment, his thoughts were on the future, on the betrayal that must come, of the freedom to follow. He wondered what it would be like, up there, beyond the stars. It would be blissful, he knew. It would be terrible, he knew also. But at least he would finally be free of that damned loud mouthed projection.

‘I can do anything for you, Jacob,’ said Loki steadily. ‘It doesn’t matter how, or why. I can. All you have to do is tell me what you want, and I will make sure you get it.’

Jacob paused: Loki could almost feel the thoughts flowing through him, leading him to the one, the only one.

‘I want to be with my son,’ he said, firmly.

And Loki nodded, as if he had known it all along.

‘When you walk back through the mist, you will find yourself exactly

where you came from. Your son will be waiting for you.'

'But the men who attacked me. They'll –'

Munin spat into the fire suddenly, spinning around as he let out a cry.

'Why're we even bothering with him, Loki? He can't even work out the simplest things!'

But Loki held Jacob's eyes, calmly and firmly, speaking softly.

'The same knowledge that brought you back from the dead can be used for other purposes. Such as altering your appearance. It is not regeneration: you can change yourself limitless times, renew yourself as often as need be to keep simple minds from growing suspicious.'

And without another word, Jacob disappeared from in front of them. In his place stood a short but broad-shouldered black man, his long hair braided into a plat running between his shoulder-blades. He suddenly burst into a broad grin, a short burst of amazement leaving his lips, before he turned and ran back into the mists.

'If you change your mind,' Loki shouted after the retreating figure, 'I will be here, waiting.'

But he knew that he wasn't strictly speaking the truth. He should have said "when", not "if".

In some ways, it was a cold and misty evening in the middle of winter, but Loki wasn't fool enough to believe that. He knew only one thing for certain:

that it would soon all be over. But, then, even that was some how untrue, because in other ways – just as truthful – it would soon be all beginning.

Munin, however, was not in the mood for such philosophical debates. He merely wanted hard and true answers, whether he was likely to get them or not.

‘What exactly is going on here, Loki?’ he snarled.

‘You’ll understand soon enough,’ was all Loki would say.

He kicked more brushwood into the fire, watching it disintegrate in the heat and light. No matter how much he kicked on, there was always more to follow.

‘I’m getting tired of you, old man,’ he muttered, nearly to himself.

‘And you’ll be rid of me soon enough,’ Loki replied, his eyes on the fire.

How many more speeches were there left for him to make? Not many, he knew. He could practically count the words off on his fingers, marking them off one by one. As he had most of his life. Soon it would be over, and the future would again be a blank page to him. Soon, but not now. Now he could see each action follow the next, as it must, see them almost before they happened. Like Jacob suddenly appearing out of the mist, for example.

Yes, just like that.

‘You’re still here,’ said Jacob, suddenly appearing out of the mist. ‘Thank God.’

‘Where else would I be?’ said Loki, mentally flicking down the finger of one hand.

‘Oh great,’ spat Munin. 'The idiot’s back.’

Loki spun on the great dark figure, his eyes burning with an anger he only barely felt.

‘Will you be silent, Munin, just for once?’

And, to his credit, the black eyed wretch did look suitably shame-faced and Loki towered over him, as if suddenly remembering just who was whose master around here. But then Jacob stepped between them, looking first to Loki, then into the two ebony eyes of the raven-man.

‘No,’ he said, his voice low, almost on the brink of tears. ‘You’re right. I’ve been an idiot.’

And Loki said nothing, merely letting Jacob fall to his knees by the fire. The skies were growing dark. It didn’t matter.

‘What happened?’ asked Loki finally, only because he knew he must.

And, shaking his head as if he could barely believe what he was saying, tears flowing as if every word was ripped from his heart, Jacob told them.

‘I watched my son grow up,’ he said.

Munin snorted, spun away again, as if that was all he needed to hear. Loki merely nodded, nothing more to say.

‘At first, it was all I wanted. It was the greatest thing that had ever happened to me. I changed my appearance every few years, reintroduced myself to him and his mother – never letting them know who I was really, of course.’

‘Of course,’ interjected Munin, bitterly.

Jacob ignored the interruption.

‘I watched as he stayed young, like I had. I watched them start to grow suspicious, watched them try to kill him when he came back from Naseby alive and well. Then I helped him escape, giving him the same advice the Doctor gave me. Keep moving. Never stay too long. And everywhere he went, I followed him, never letting him know who I was.’

Jacob paused, let out a quiet sob.

‘I could hardly bear it! Over a hundred years and he never aged a day. And I followed him round like a faithful puppy, his ever loving father. And he never once knew who I was. It was like a living hell, this heaven of mine.’

Loki nodded thoughtfully, if only to hide the tear that was running down his cheek.

‘So you thought it’d be a great idea if you told him. What did you do, visit him in your old shape? His dear beloved father, back from the dead?’

Jacob nodded, but would say nothing. Loki knew what he had to do.

‘What happened?’

Jacob kept his eyes on the fire, the tears rolling into the flames, dying there.

‘He didn’t remember me,’ he whispered.

And the only sound in all that misty landscape was the sharp retort of Munin laughing. It sounded like the harsh call of the crow.

‘What can I do?’ Jacob asked eventually, his dark eyes looking imploringly up into Loki’s.

It was all Loki could do not to laugh, not to leap up with joy and fling his arms into the air. He felt like screaming his name to the misty sky, grabbing that annoying bird Munin and waltzing with him across the hillside. He didn’t, of course, knowing that Jacob did not need that now, but it took an effort to control it. At last, after so many years, the moment was finally here. That moment he had thought would never come, no matter how much closer it crawled. He was so very nearly free.

‘I will tell you what you will do,’ said Loki, ‘and I will tell you what will happen.’

And both Jacob and Munin looked at him then, as he stepped forward at took the crying man firmly by the shoulders. It wasn’t so much what he said, but the way he looked as he said it. He suddenly stood straighter, all the pretence of age falling away from him, a young man at heart, despite the greying hair and the encroaching years. Jacob found that he couldn’t move: he was frozen by the light in Loki’s burning blue eyes. As he knew he would be.

‘You will do what you have to,’ Loki continued, his voice softening. ‘You have had your last moment of freedom, until this time returns again. Now you will take the gift I have to give you – every piece of knowledge I possess, every memory I have left in me. You will take my gift, my curse, and you will know what you will do.’

And with that, Loki pressed a single finger to Jacob's forehead. Without a sound, the Time Lord sank to his knees, his eyes on the mud. He barely seemed to be breathing.

'You,' Loki said, turning to Munin. 'You will help him in one act, and then you will have your freedom, as I have mine.'

'What?' asked Munin dumbly.

Loki grinned. He just couldn't help himself.

'You will help him steal you from Odin,' he said, and then turned away.

He took a last glance down at Jacob, kneeling on the floor before him, taking in every word, not seeming to. He felt a sudden pang of sadness, knowing what lay ahead for the poor creature. He had thought his joy would be too great for that to concern him.

Then it hit him. He had been surprised. For the first time in millennia, Loki hadn't known what would happen.

There was a broad grin on his face as he turned and headed into the mist.

'Where will you go?' Jacob asked quietly.

Loki smiled, feeling each word as they left his lips. They were the last words that he spoke from his script, the last words that had been lain down in stone for him all those years ago.

'The universe isn't big enough for the both of us,' he said. 'But then the universe isn't everything.'

And with that, he walked away into the mist. He didn't know where he

was going, what he would do. It didn't matter: he liked it that way.

It was late night, and the mist was fast closing in around them. The fire was burning strong, but it wouldn't last forever. Munin was no fool, he could see that. Now his master had left him, leaving in the service of this . . . creature, for the time being. Then freedom would be his. He wondered what it would be like, briefly. Perhaps he would find out sooner than Loki had expected: the wrecked creature by the fire hadn't moved in over two hours, barely even making a sound. Munin wondered whether he was dead.

Munin pushed his shoulder with a tentative hand, trying to remember what the creature was called.

'Jacob?' he said quietly, only half sure he had the right name.

With a sudden snap of energy, the creature unfolded before him. He stretched broad shoulders, planted heavy feet into the mud, shaking free a mane of burning red hair. The creature had changed its appearance again, then. Even though Munin knew he could do this, it still set his bones on edge as he saw it happen. Especially when Jacob fixed him with a burning blue-eyed gaze and smiled with brilliant white teeth.

'Please,' he said silkily, 'call me Loki.'

With a firm motion, Loki kicked out the fire, and the mist leapt in.